

Mother Knows Best

CatiiaSofiia

Star Wars Prequel Trilogy

Complete



Mother Knows Best

CatiiaSofia

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.109 on July 19th, 2024, based on content retrieved from archiveofourown.org/works/15724533.

The content in this book is copyrighted by [CatiiaSofiiia](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on August 18th, 2018, and was last updated on December 15th, 2018.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/lytqkop7/Bwf00C561

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. First Meeting
2. Meetings and Dates
3. Worst Dinner Date Ever
4. Deals, Ultimatums, and Choices
5. A Bitter Pill
6. Bad Choices
7. Worst Party Ever
8. Everyone has Regrets
9. A Series of Bitter Pills
10. Executive Meddling
11. Coronation Day
12. Adventures in Domesticity
13. Always a New Crisis to Solve
14. Misadventures with Vacations
15. The End of the Meddling
16. Morning After
17. Surprises
18. Back Where We Began

Summary

title Mother Knows Best
author CatiaSofia
source <https://archiveofourown.org/works/15724533>
published August 18th, 2018
updated December 15th, 2018
words 85,348
chapters 18
status Complete
rating Mature
tags Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Ailee (Star Wars), Anakin Skywalker, Angst with a Happy Ending, Bail Organa, Cliegg Lars, Complete, Evil Shmi Skywalker (okay not evil just not that nice either), Heavy Angst, Kitster Chanchani Banai, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Owen Lars, Padmé Amidala, Padmé Amidala/Anakin Skywalker, Palo (Star Wars), Rakir Banai, Shmi Skywalker, Star Wars Prequel Trilogy, Teckla Minnau

Description:

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

Shmi Skywalker Palpatine had ruled the Galactic Empire on behalf of her son, Anakin, since the death of his father. For his part, the next Emperor has been content to leave politics to his mother and engage only in military exercises. All that is about to change as Padmé Naberrie, former Queen of Naboo, comes seeking aid for her charity, Amidala's Crusade, and Anakin's long-dormant crush comes surging back.

What should be a perfect match is opposed by a mother determined not to lose her son and convinced hers is the only way...

1. First Meeting

“Anakin. Anakin, hey!” Kitster rapped on the door of the Imperial Prince’s workshop. “Put down the droids, you’ve *got* to see what’s happening in the Senate right now.”

Anakin opened the door, wiping a smudge of oil from his forehead. He had been tinkering with the engine of his ship for the past couple of hours, a welcome distraction after the amount of information about political strategies his mother had crammed into his head all morning. “What is it?”

“Do you remember Queen Amidala of Naboo? She came asking for help when we were nine? She’s back,” his best friend told him. “And she looks *incredible*. Apparently, Senator Organa’s sponsoring the charity she started after she retired.”

“Well, you could have lead with that!” Anakin huffed and shut the door in his friend’s face. There was a rustle inside the room and the door opened again, Anakin’s face was free from any smudges and he had dressed his black coat with gold details. ‘I didn’t know she was in town,’ he said. Padmé Amidala had been his childhood and early teens crush. Her beauty had stunned him ever since the first time he laid eyes on her. And he had been just a nine year old, a far cry from the man he was today, almost the Emperor of the Galaxy. “Do you think she’ll come to the party my mother is throwing tonight?”

“Probably, she needs to get more people on board with whatever it is she’s doing,” Kitster smirked a little. “What was it you said to me the first time we saw her? ‘Kit, that’s an angel and I’m going to marry her one day?’” The imitation of Anakin’s childhood voice was embarrassingly high-pitched. “Maybe you’ll get your chance now. I mean, what girl would say no to being a princess?”

“With my luck? Probably her!” Anakin snorted as he rolled his eyes at his best friend’s antics. ‘If she does come to the party tonight, I want to make a good impression. Enough with people saying I’m a spoiled mama’s boy.’ He said, clearly frustrated. “I want her to see a mature side. I don’t people’s whispers to poison her opinion of me.”

“But you *are* a spoiled mama’s boy,” Kitster teased, ducking out of reach before Anakin could hurt him. “Now come on!”

Anakin huffed and followed his friend. He was eager to see Queen Amidala again. When they reached the Senate Rotunda, she was in one of the central pods, standing next to Bail Organa, and in mid-speech.

“We cannot, in good conscience, allow this kind of abuse to continue.”

“Lady Naberrie,” a Senator spoke up, “what you are suggesting could lead to war with some very powerful crime families. Why should anyone want to take on such a risk?”

“If it means the liberation of *slaves*,” the young woman replied calmly, “then I think the risks are worth it. Otherwise, you’ve already surrendered in a war of selfishness against morals.”

“Wow, she’s as brutal as she is gorgeous,” Kitster whispered.

“I know,” Anakin whispered, eyes fixed on the former Queen. “That’s why she is one of the greatest women on the Galaxy. Her beauty has grown. She’s so... mature.”

“If you want to court a woman like Pamé Amidala, you should improve your pickup lines,” Kitster snorted.

Anakin made a face, knowing his game with women was a little weak. “Shut up.”

“What is it you require from the Empire, Lady Naberrie?” From the central pod, the Empress’ quiet, sharp voice silenced everyone.

“Two million credits in funding, Your Majesty,” Padmé answered Anakin’s mother with the kind of serene face most people only wished they had when talking to the Dowager Empress. “And for the Senate to consider opening their worlds to refugees and liberated slaves.”

Anakin looked from his mother to the former Queen. He knew the look on his mother’s face. Shmi was not ready to cooperate with Padmé’s request. Anakin admired Padmé just for the fact she didn’t waver under Shmi Skywalker’s glare.

“Add brave to the list,” Kitster whistled.

“Maybe I can convince my mother to support her cause. As the Crown Prince, I should get involved in the Galaxy’s problems and I feel slavery is a huge problem that should be dealt with. Who better to support in this cause than Padmé?” Anakin argued.

“We will take it under advisement and have an answer for you by the week’s end, Lady Naberrie,” Shmi said finally.

“Thank you, your majesty.” The Alderaanian pod started to retreat and Kitster prodded Anakin’s shoulder.

“Go! You can meet her at the Rotunda exit, invite her to lunch to talk about her work and then ask her to the ball. It’s perfect.”

“When did you become such an expert?” Anakin asked rhetorically, as he rushed to meet up with Padmé, people hurrying out of the Prince’s away as they exited the Senate meeting. He slowed his pace as he neared her. Up close, she was even more breathtaking, wearing a dress that resembled one of Naboo’s waterfalls, intricately embroidered blue silk tumbling down her slender frame, her brown curls secured in an elaborate braid. She was speaking with a few Senators, who caught him approaching them and bowed. “Good afternoon, everyone, may I have a private word with Lady Amidala?” As they nodded, they quickly retreated and left the pair alone. “Lady Amidala, I wanted to formally introduce myself. Anakin Skywalker, Crown Prince of the Galactic Empire. I was watching you during the meeting and I was very taken by the subject you were defending,” Anakin said, beaming and hoping he didn’t seem like a kid to her. After all, she was a little older than he was.

“It’s Naberrie, actually, Your Highness,” she said, dipping a curtsy and blushing a little. “Amidala was my regnal name, I don’t use it anymore. But that is very kind of you. I only hope your mother will come to a similar decision.”

Anakin smiled, oozing charm and sympathy. “My mother can be a little difficult at times, but I would like to speak with you a little more about your ideas, Lady Naberrie. If you would do me the honor of having lunch with me? As I prepare to become Emperor, I am expected to support causes that I believe in and slavery is something that I would truly like to see abolished.”

“If it were any other day, I’d be honored, your highness, but I already have a meeting scheduled with my board of directors,” Padmé apologized, fingering the black stone that was resting on her sternum, wrapped in some kind of sparkly wire. “Perhaps tomorrow would work instead?”

“I understand,” he said, a bit disappointed. “Tomorrow sounds absolutely fine, Lady Naberrie, but tell me, are you coming to the ball tonight that my mother is throwing to celebrate the Empire’s establishment thirty years ago. We would be honored to have you.” Anakin grinned, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“I haven’t received an invitation,” she told him. For a moment, her face wrinkled in on itself as she thought it over. “I wasn’t planning on it, are you sure it’d be alright?”

“I am the Prince, aren’t I?” Anakin chuckled. “You’ll be my guest and it will be absolutely fine. I can even introduce you to my mother so you two are able to speak a little more about your organization. I know it’s something personal to her. She’ll listen.”

“Thank you, that’s very generous of you, Your Highness.” Padmé tucked a strand of hair that had escaped her braid back behind her ear. “I’d be delighted.”

“Good, then I look forward to accompanying you tonight, Lady Naberrie.”

“You can call me Padme if you prefer, Your Highness.”

“If you agree to call me Anakin, then.” He retorted, a dazzling smile gracing his features.

“Oh.” Her cheeks flushed a very flattering shade of pink. “Well, if you say so... Anakin. I really should be going now, though, I’ve got to get to that call. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Kiss her hand when you say goodbye, Anakin heard Kitster think through the Force.

Anakin took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Believe me when I say... the pleasure was all mine... Padmé.”

Get off of my mind, Kitster. Anakin huffed internally. *But thanks for the tip.*

“Anakin.” His mother’s voice cut through their conversation. “I wasn’t aware you were visiting the Rotunda today.”

“Your Majesty.” Padmé pulled her hand away from Anakin’s and sank into a low curtsy. ‘I’m sorry, I’ll be on my way.’ For a moment, she looked at Anakin, and it wasn’t clear what was in her eyes. Pity? Compassion? Attraction? “It was an honor to meet you, Prince Anakin.”

Anakin was startled with his mother’s appearance, alternating between looking at her and at Padmé. “M-Mom, I was just welcoming Lady Naberrie. She usually doesn’t visit the Rotunda and I was being a gracious host, welcoming her to Imperial Center,” he explained standing up straighter. “You too, Lady Naberrie, I’ll wait for you tonight at the party.”

As Padmé hurried off, Kitster and Anakin shifted uncomfortably under his mother's gaze. "I was not aware that we'd invited Lady Naberrie to this evening's gala," Shmi said coldly.

"Lady Naberrie is the former Queen of Naboo, and still a very respected woman among our political allies. I thought it would be a good idea to invite her so she could explain to us a little more about what her organization represents. It might be a good idea to listen to her, Mom," Anakin explained.

"Idealistic crusades, however admirable their intentions are dangerous in politics, Anakin," Shmi warned. "And your actions have consequences that you need to think about before you act." Anakin looked down, embarrassed.

"He hasn't made any commitment, Your Majesty," Kitster interjected helpfully. "But it's worth considering, especially if other worlds start committing like she asked, right?"

Anakin nodded, encouraged by his friend's words. "Yes, Mom, or are you going to tell me slavery is not one of the biggest issues we have to deal with? I, for one, would like to put a stop to it and I find Lady Naberrie's ideas a good way to begin that process!"

"And what about the number of planets and systems that have trade agreements with the Hutts? With Zygerria?" Kitster exchanged a glance with Anakin, gagging at the thought of Miraj Scintel. "I saw that, Kitster Banai."

"Sorry, ma'am."

"The Hutts and Zygerria are not exactly peaceful factions. They thrive on wars. On bloodshed and sacrifice. You *must* be aware of that, Mom. Isn't our duty as rulers that our people across the Galaxy find peace? Not suffering?" Anakin scowled. "I believe there are alternatives for the trade agreements."

Shmi sighed, shaking her head. "Have your little guest if you wish, Anakin, but think through every possible consequence your actions could have before you follow through. Do you understand?"

"Yes, don't I always?" Anakin quipped.

His mother shook her head yet again. "Do you *really* want me to answer that? Run along now, you have plenty to do before this evening."

Shmi Skywalker Palpatine closed the door of her bedroom, dismissing her maids with a wave of her hand. She wasn't interested in having anyone fussing over her at the moment. Anakin was never so *engaged*. He'd always been content to focus on his racing, droids and saber training and leave the majority of politics to her. And things had been perfectly fine that way.

She glanced at the small holo on her vanity table, one of her holding baby Anakin in her arms as she walked him around the nursery, twenty years old, newly widowed, and the happiest she had been in a long time.

Padmé Naberrie knew nothing about slavery. She crusaded for the obvious reasons, but she didn't seem to care about women who were essentially sold off for the benefit of their

families, the way Shmi had been to Sheev Palpatine. What right did she have to stand there and lecture everyone, to lecture her *Empress* in such a way?

No one had helped Shmi during the four years after her father had traded her to the Emperor in exchange for financial security. No one had helped her when she'd struggled to gain political ground only to be told that her one duty was to conceive an heir. No one had been there when she'd held Anakin in her arms and decided that the worst thing she could possibly do for her child would be to let Sheev continue breathing.

For twenty years, she had been painstakingly ruling in her son's name, doing everything to erase any problems he might have when he turned twenty-one. And perhaps that had made Anakin too sheltered and naive, but it had suited them both just fine until today. Until Padmé Naberrie.

She would have to keep a very close eye on both of them tonight.

"No, Threepio, that won't do either," Anakin complained, looking incredibly frustrated and throwing yet another shirt haphazardly across the floor. The golden protocol droid fussed over the discarded clothes. "Isn't there anything else? Really? I'm the Crown Prince of the Empire, I need to look like it. I've worn all of this before and some of these clothes just make me look too young."

"You *are* too young," Kitster quipped from a nearby couch where he was lazily stretched out, already impeccably dressed for the ball. "Putting on a fancy jacket won't change that."

"Why are you always around?" Anakin complained, throwing his arms up in the air. There were two hours left for the ball and he was still undressed, towel around his waist, hair still damp from the fresher, the edges curling around his neck.

Kitster only laughed, distracting himself with a datapad game. "Honestly, Anakin, you're too concerned. Padmé will find you cute either way."

"I don't want her to find me *cute*," Anakin made a face. "I won't be able to court her with *cute*."

"Wait, so you're actually thinking of going through with that?" Kitster paused the game, narrowing his eyes at his best friend.

Anakin shrugged. "Maybe."

His best friend nodded slowly and unpause the game. "Your babies will be beautiful."

"And intelligent," Anakin added.

"Only if they take after their mother," Kitster quipped teasingly and Anakin threw one of his shoes at him. 'Alright, I can take a hint. I'm heading to the ballroom, mingle, meet new prospects for me since, apparently, the heir to the crown is already taken!' He jumped to his feet. "Good luck, Threepio," he said as he left the rooms.

"Master Ani, I am running out of options," Threepio fretted.

"I need something to bring out my eyes. They're my best feature!" Anakin sighed looking around the dozens of options.

"May I suggest the royal uniform, Master Ani? It is the celebration of the Empire and you are the heir. It's suitable and from the comments of women and your mother herself, you will look extremely dashing with it," Threepio suggested, grabbing the garment from the wardrobe.

Anakin inspected the outfit. He did look good in the uniform and it made him seem more mature, not to mention that it gave him a sort of edge while wearing it. He took the suit from Threepio's arms and nodded. "Good call, Threepio."

"Finally!" Threepio confessed. "I'll leave you to get arranged, Master Ani, please do not be late. Your mother has very strict rules."

"You worry too much, Threepio," Anakin waved him off. "Now leave. I need to get ready. This ball is very important to me."

"Yes, of course, Master Ani."

To say that Padmé was nervous was an understatement. Shocked and grateful to the Prince for inviting her, but unbelievably nervous. She fidgeted with the voluminous purple skirts of the gown she'd managed to find on short notice and wondered if she should have refused Prince Anakin's offer.

No. Some things were more important than personal anxieties. She'd founded Amidala's Crusade to help people, and she couldn't back down. Swallowing her fears and doubts, she lifted her skirts and descended the staircase into the ballroom, one of the protocol droids calling her name to announce her arrival. She recognized a few Senators in the crowd, but nearly everyone else was a complete stranger.

As soon as he heard her name, Anakin's head shot up and his chin dropped. She was a vision in her ballgown and it looked like he was seeing her for the first time all over again, feeling the warmth spread all over his body. An undeniable pull, this electricity he couldn't explain or put into words. He gravitated towards the stairs, a beaming smile on his face.

"Lady Naberrie, you look absolutely stunning," he said, extending his hand to help her down the last couple of steps.

"You're too kind, your highness," she said, flushing pink. "And I thought I'd asked you to call me Padmé."

He laughed softly. "You did and I apologize for the mistake. Would you let me introduce you to some of the members of the court, Padmé? I know there are many unfamiliar faces and I would be happy to accompany you tonight."

"That would be greatly appreciated, thank you" she smiled in relief as she placed her hand in his elbow. "I haven't had to do anything like this since I was fourteen."

"Lucky you," he chuckled. "This is basically my whole life."

“And that’s why I retired from being Queen after eight years.” She fingered her necklace again.

“I don’t have that chance. But I don’t mean I don’t want to be Emperor. I want to. To make a difference. That’s why your crusade appeals to me, Padmé, I could truly make a difference by helping you.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling softly. “This really does mean a lot to me. Back when the Trade Federation started their blockade on Naboo, and I was coming to Imperial Center, they damaged my ship, and we had to make a landing on Tatooine. We might have been stranded there forever if it hadn’t been for the kindness of a former slave. I felt I owed them something. That I couldn’t continue to be blind to something that awful.”

“It’s a very honorable thing to want to help not only them but millions of slaves across the Galaxy,” Anakin stated. “Now, shall I introduce you to the most influential people in the Galaxy?” He grinned as they approached a group of Ambassadors who immediately quieted down and turned to the Prince. Anakin introduced Padmé to them and they made small talk until he moved to the next group and from there, to the next, allowing her to speak her ideas and to let her get acquainted. He loved to listen to her speak and to hear her passion as she defended her crusade. It was truly a vision.

“Honestly, this is an opportunity to create a healthier galactic economy. More people working means that more services and goods will be required, which generates revenue,” Padmé explained to the Muun head of the Banking Clan. “Surely you stand to benefit from that.”

“We will consider it, Lady Naberrie,” the old banker nodded slowly. “A pleasure to meet you. Your Highness.” He bowed to Anakin, and Padmé sighed.

“Did that go as badly as it felt?” she whispered.

“They’re old, stubborn men. It took them a long time to respect my mother and their only problem as that she was a woman in power,” he sighed. “Forget about them, for now, or they’ll ruin your night.”

“I really don’t know if I should be here,” Padmé confessed. “It doesn’t seem like anyone really likes me. They’re just tolerating me because I’m standing next to you.”

“Because even if they know your name, you’re a stranger to this environment. You’ve left the court a long time ago. People are just afraid you’re going to steal attention from their own bills and crusades. That’s how the court works,” Anakin tried to soothe her. “Give them some time to warm up to you.”

“I don’t know why this feels so different, I was a queen for eight years,” she fretted. “How are you so calm?”

He just raised one eyebrow. “I’ve been a Crown Prince for twenty years.”

“Well, I know that, but no one’s ever really seen you get involved in politics. Usually, when you’re on the holonet, it’s about military exercises.”

“Yes, but I’ve been studying politics ever since I could read. It’s not like I’m ignorant of them. It’s because of opinions like that that I need to start to get involved. I’ll be twenty-one

in less than a year. My coronation is drawing closer and closer and I need to start getting involved.”

“So it’s not true.”

“What?” He frowned.

“Well, I was asked to join the Senate in part because some felt people like me would be needed when you took the throne because you didn’t know anything about ruling,” she explained quietly. “I thought they were exaggerating, and given Naboo’s history, I felt someone else could just as easily do the job as I could. I wanted a chance to focus solely on what I started when I was in office.”

“People don’t believe I can rule, then,” he affirmed, clearly disappointed and shifting awkwardly. “It’s not a surprise, everyone treats me like I’m made of glass and completely naive.”

“Your mother is… very protective, but it’s understandable, considering what happened to your father.”

“What else do they say about me?” Anakin asked.

“That nearly every girl in the galaxy is madly in love with you.”

Anakin sighed and she couldn’t tell if it was embarrassment or annoyance. “I’m not asking that, Padmé, I’m asking in terms of me taking the Crown. Of ruling. What is whispered around the Galaxy?”

“I wouldn’t know, I don’t listen to that kind of gossip if I can help it,” she said bluntly.

He nodded. “Good for you. What I do know is that they expect me to quit after a year and hand the reins fully to my mother.”

“I suppose you plan to prove them all wrong.”

Laughing, he nodded. “Kriffing true,” he muttered under his breath.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to annoy you.”

“You didn’t. I’m sorry if I seem annoyed. I just can’t wait until I prove them all wrong.”

“Will you let me be blunt?”

“Only because it’s you,” he gave her a beaming smile.

“Don’t be a good leader to prove them wrong. Be one because that’s what the galaxy and its people deserve.”

Anakin turned to face her, amazement dancing in his eyes. “You know, I’m supposed to open the dance floor,” he began, nodding at the leader of the band, letting him know he was ready. “Will you give me the honor?” He offered her his hand.

“I’d be delighted,” she said, resting her left hand on his shoulder as she placed her fingers on his palm.

The entire ballroom quieted and stopped, to watch the Prince and the former Queen dance elegantly, sliding across the floor. Somehow, Anakin knew his mother was glaring daggers at them, but as he held Padmé in his arms and guided their movements expertly across the dance floor, he didn't care.

"Do you do this with everyone you have political business with?" she asked quietly as she moved in closer with the swell of the music. "Or am I just lucky?"

"You have been the only one to capture my attention in a really long time," he whispered, with a soft smile. "The last time I was so captivated, I was nine and listening to the most heartfelt speech from a beautiful Queen from Naboo."

Padmé's eyes widened and her hand began to slip down. "Y-you can't be serious," she stammered.

He gripped her hand tighter. "I'm sorry," he blushed. "Was that too much information?"

"It's a little intimidating," she whispered. "That was eleven years ago."

"I'm not a stalker, by the way," he chuckled. "I just remember being very taken by your words. You were also the most beautiful woman I had met so far in my life. So, when I heard you were back in the Imperial Center, I decided to probably introduce myself."

"So you don't actually care about fighting the slave trade?"

His face fell. "Oh, Padmé, no. It's not like that. Of course I care. Trust me, I want to help your crusade, personal reasons aside. I am not that shallow or self-centered. I would never do something like that."

"I believe you." The music started to fade out and she stepped back curtsying. "But I think I should let someone else have a turn with you right now."

Anakin nodded as he watched her basically run away from him. He probably should have kept that small piece of information to himself. He just made a fool of himself and probably creeped her out. "What did you do!?" Kitster demanded, practically materializing at his side. "What did you say, everything looked fine and then she just pulled away!"

"I might have told her I have a crush on her since I was nine," Anakin groaned, shoulders dropping. "I'm such an idiot, she'll never want to see me again."

"Well, you still have the meeting tomorrow, right? You could do some damage control then. Please tell me you're thinking about how to fix it."

"If she shows up. She might as well cancel it with the way I behaved."

"Hey, hey, it'll be okay, I'll do some damage control while you deal with everyone else," Kitster promised. "Breathe a little. I've never let you down before, right?"

"No, but I just see you doing worse when it comes to her," Anakin said warily. "I mean, Kitster, you're my best friend but this... this woman is special to me, even if that is completely irrational."

"Fine." Kitster raised his hand. "Just trying to help."

Across the room, Padmé managed to locate Bail. “You look a little flushed,” he remarked. “Is everything alright?”

“Do you know the prince well, Bail?”

“He’s a nice enough young man, a little reserved, but a good heart. Why? A little starstruck?”

“What? No! No, don’t be—”

“Lady Naberrie.” The Empress’ voice cut in. “Might I have a word? Privately, if you don’t mind, Senator Organa.”

“Of course,” Padmé stammered, looking at Bail worriedly. Her friend only shrugged and backed away with a bow, leaving Padmé trapped under a steely gaze that looked ready to slice her in half. “What is it, your Majesty?”

“My son. He’s quite taken with you.” Shmi was not a woman to go in circles. Especially not when it came to her only son. “It’s the first year he willingly danced with someone, so you must understand how curious I am.”

“My work appeals to him, your Majesty,” Padmé answered, fighting the urge to fidget with her sleeves. “He offered to let me come here to further petition possible supporters for the Liberation Front of Amidala’s Crusade.”

“Your work,” Shmi began slowly. “That is all?” She raised her eyebrows. “Anakin is not a boy to be interested in politics. Surely, you can understand that boys are very easy to distract and become enchanted and I don’t think you did that with a few words about your slavery ideas, my dear.”

“Empress, I don’t think you’re giving your son enough credit, he seems quite determined to be a fair and just ruler, and is preparing himself to that end,” Padmé said, managing to hide her annoyance behind the regulated tones she had so often used as Queen.

“Don’t believe you know my son better than me,” Shmi’s expression didn’t change, but her voice got colder. “And don’t believe that you know what is best to fight slavery in this Galaxy. You were raised as a Princess. A Queen. Comfort was present every day of your life and you never starved, you never knew what cold or hunger felt like. What makes you ideal for this Crusade, after all?”

“The fact that my parents raised me to use my privilege and good fortune to help those who were not afforded the same opportunities,” Padmé answered defiantly. “Just because I have not suffered does not mean I cannot feel compassion and a need to rectify wrongs when I see them.”

A muscle in Shmi’s jaw twitched, but she didn’t lose her regal expression. “You’re a martyr, then. That is what qualifies you?” Shmi looked around the ballroom. “Have you managed to gather any support for your cause, Lady Naberrie? You’ve been forgotten ever since you rejected a seat in the Senate, I don’t think people are very willing to welcome you again.”

“Senators Organa and Bonteri have both been very generous in their efforts to collaborate with us,” she answered. “And of course, Queen Jamillia has been all too happy to provide

further resources.”

“And now you’re using my son’s infatuation to help you further,” Shmi added with a bitter smile.

“Your Majesty, I would never do that sort of thing! I have morals.”

“Morals is not something the Empire is used to and forgive me if I stopped believing in plain good intentions. In my experience, which is very valued and kept me alive and peacefully ruling for twenty years, people always want more, they always have a secret agenda,” Shmi said darkly. “And I won’t let my son go through heartache just so you can make business, Lady Naberrie.”

“I am sorry, but I am not that kind of person. If your son wants to help me, that is his prerogative, your Majesty,” Padmé insisted. “And thank you for reaffirming that I made the right choice in not accepting the Senate post.”

“Yes, you did,” Shmi agreed. “Stay away from my son, Lady Naberrie. He’ll be Emperor soon and needs to focus on other topics and find the *right* woman to be his Consort.”

“Your son is a man fully capable of making his own decisions, Empress, and I think you do him a disservice by treating him like a child when he clearly isn’t one anymore.”

“*Don’t* teach me on how to handle my own blood and flesh,” Shmi gave one threatening step forward. “I know Anakin better than he knows himself. Mother always knows best, dear, haven’t you heard it before? I hope your time in the Imperial Center is reaching an end, Lady Naberrie, my son has distractions enough.”

“I have no plans to return in the foreseeable future. But, if your son decides he wishes to invite me back, your majesty, who am I to refuse the Emperor?” Padmé asked innocently. “Good night.”

“Lady Naberrie, I do hope you decide to listen to me,” Shmi said sternly. “Stay away from Anakin.”

“I will take it under advisement,” Padmé said, perfectly mimicking the Empress’ tone from her hearing earlier that day. As she started to move away, a young man with dark skin and thick black hair approached her. “You’re friends with the Prince, aren’t you?”

“Kitster Banai,” he said, smiling at her. “At your service, milady.”

Padmé bit her lip. “Will you please tell the Prince that if he wants, I’ll still meet him at my hotel tomorrow for lunch. Privately. You can get my information from Senator Organa. I think I need to leave now, though.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Fine,” Padmé said reassuringly. “I just... feel a little lightheaded. Will you tell him I’m sorry?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Kitster.”

“Believe me, it’s my pleasure.”

2. Meetings and Dates

Anakin rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants as he tried to hide his nerves underneath a nonchalant expression. He had been elated when Kitster told him Padmé still wanted to meet him for lunch. He had barely slept thinking about it. He knew he had royally screwed up when he blurted that she had been his crush when he was just a kid. He requested a private room at the hotel's restaurant and dodged his Mom for the entire morning. Shmi looked like she was in every corner, hovering over him like he was a small child, smothering him. He had yet to understand her foul mood.

He sat on the table, watching the chrono on the wall, leg bouncing up and down, going over his speech to apologize to Padmé for being so bold and for definitely crossing some boundaries. In his insomnia, he had done his research about Amidala's Crusade. Learned everything he needed to so he could show her his interest was also political. Then he searched for past bills about slavery to see where they went wrong and what they could do to prevent it to happen this time around. He felt prepared to speak with her. But of course that meant nothing, Anakin knew he might just end up making a fool of himself.

One of the servers knocked before opening the door to the private room and letting Padmé in. She was dressed in pale pink and looked a little tired, but still beautiful. "I'm sorry I'm late, I got a last minute meeting with the Banking Clan," she said apologetically as the waiter pulled out the chair opposite Anakin's. "I guess you were right, it didn't go horribly. And I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly last night."

He had stood to meet her and smiled warmly at her, sitting back down. "I hope you weren't too traumatized last night because of what I said. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just... I was really amazed by you when I was a kid, you were in my first ever Senate meeting," Anakin rambled, and felt his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment. "I... I just wanted to let you know I admired you then and I admire you now, I didn't want to sound like a stalker... I... stop me if I'm just making the situation worse," he cringed.

"No, no, it's," she paused, wetting her lips. "It's flattering. I just didn't want to give the wrong impression. There were... people who were insinuating that I was using you for my own agenda. I didn't want to start anything."

Anakin narrowed his eyes. "That is absurd. Not to mention, a completely improper thing to say about you or myself."

"Even so." Padmé took a sip from the glass of wine in front of her. "A public scene wouldn't have benefitted either of us. And while I appreciate that you'd want to defend me, that would only fuel the proverbial fire."

"Will you tell me who insinuated that?" Anakin said, frowning. She looked down, shaking her head. "While I respect it, I hope the comments did not affect you. People will say the most awful things to get their way. If you ever have problems in working with me, all you need to do is come and talk with me, alright? I'll respect whichever decision you make."

“Thank you. So, I know you don’t officially have access to the treasury the way you’d need to for the funding that’s required, but resettlement is vital. Do you have any connections, anyone who might have land available?”

“I have my own,” he said casually. “Until I have official access to the treasury and lands of the Empire, I won’t mind lending you my own. See it as a donation from my part.”

“Your mother will love that,” Padmé muttered sarcastically before clapping her hands over her mouth in a panic.

He chuckled. “My Mom is difficult, yes, but she doesn’t control my personal assets anymore. She only controls the crown until I turn twenty-one. She can’t stop me or my decision to donate my own patrimony.”

Padmé’s shoulders slumped a little as she lowered her hands to pick up the datapad between the two of them and enter her lunch order. “If you say so.” She passed it over to him. “Does your mother ever talk about him? Your father?”

“No. It’s not her favorite subject to approach or mention. From the little that I know, I am not missing much. I do know that he was from Naboo. Which means that I also am part of your people,” he smiled, beaming at that little detail.

“Sort of,” she nodded. “Though feelings on him have always been mixed. Naboo prizes democracy quite highly. For one of our own to become an Emperor was seen as a disgrace. There was actually a lot of support for your mother when he passed and she started making changes.”

“I can’t help but admire her. She was only twenty. Widowed and I was a few months old. I know she seems a difficult woman to deal with, but she is one of the strongest women I know and she has done amazing things for the Galaxy.”

Padmé’s lips pressed into a line for a moment, but she nodded. “She has a lot of accomplishments worth being proud of. But I think there’s no harm in a new perspective.”

“Do you have any advice for the future Emperor? I *could* use a new perspective,” Anakin smiled at her as he did his own request.

“Make sure you have people you trust, not just as advisors, but as friends,” she said. “Friends are so vital in a job that can feel so alone, I don’t know if I would have made it through those eight years without my handmaidens.”

“I see and I understand. I do have people I trust. Not many, but enough. My Mom always says that my worst flaw as an Emperor will probably be wearing my heart on my sleeve. Being too emotional. Too involved. She’s scared people will take advantage of that. Especially when the Galaxy thinks I am just a spoiled brat with a privileged life that knows nothing of the real world,” he confessed with a small sigh, taking a sip of his wine.

“Compassion is strength, not weakness,” Padmé said, shaking her head. “And if she’s really *that* worried, she could always restore more powers to the Senate. That way, the burden wouldn’t be on you so much.” He would probably take it as a joke, but part of her was deadly serious.

“She would if she trusted the Senate. I’m not saying all of the Senators present have bad intentions, but you have to agree that most have their own agenda and before the Empire was created, the Republic was achieving nothing but war after war,” Anakin leaned back and pursed his lips. “While democracy is a beautiful idea, sometimes it’s not the right answer. In that, I have to agree with my mother.”

“Of course.” The former Queen rolled her eyes as the serving droid rolled in with their meals.

“Don’t be mad with me, Padmé, but I believe everything goes a lot smoother when you have someone in complete control. I don’t mean, obviously, that the Galaxy needs a tyrant like my father used to be, but a firm hand is going to lead us to greatness. Haven’t the war costs and casualties dropped in the last two decades?” Anakin played with his glass of wine.

“At what personal cost?” she asked quietly. “How much personal liberty has been given up in the sake of order? I’m not saying democracy is perfect by any means, but surrendering all choice in how life is lived isn’t any better.”

“We are not oppressing the Galaxy, that’s not what we want. We give the planets the chance to rule as they deem fit, but with some measure of control so everyone has the same rights. There are rogue nations, as always were and as always will be, but we strive to give the people in this Galaxy their best chance,” Anakin argued. “We listen to the Senate. To their bills. We are not, at all, inflexible.”

“That’s not the point.” Padmé paused to take a bite of the salad in front of her. “There were checks and balances in the Republic. What the Trade Federation did to Naboo was wrong, but not so much that the entirety of Cato Neimoidia needed to pay the price.”

Anakin looked down at his plate. “I do not condone what she has done to Cato Neimoidia, you need to know that. But I was nine at the time, I couldn’t do anything, I barely knew what was happening myself. If it was today, I would have stopped it.”

“I feel a personal level of responsibility,” Padmé explained softly. “It was because of me... All that death...”

He shifted uncomfortable. “It was a tremendous loss and I think she came to regret it. It’s not worth much, right now, but she will have to live with her decisions. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Maybe we should change the subject.”

“Yes,” he smiled and moved forward, digging into his entrée. “What is the next step of your Crusade?”

“I’m partnering with my father’s Refugee Relief Movement to see about getting the liberated slaves integrated into our society and part of the community,” she said. “Considering the number of workers and resources they have, I’m hopeful that part of the transfer will be much smoother than freeing them has been.”

“I have done my research and I’ve found out that, unfortunately, there are not a lot of shelters that are supported by the Empire to help the freed slaves or the ones that escape. It’s something that I would like to change. The poverty in some of the planets of the Outer Rim is unbelievable and I imagine it I had been a slave... I imagine it’s a very difficult process to be

part of the society again. If I could travel to Naboo later and meet with your father, we could speak about supporting his Movement,” Anakin said, hoping he sounded eloquent enough.

“I don’t think you’re going to have time to leave Imperial Center, considering how close we are to your birthday and coronation. But I’m sure Father would be honored to come and meet with you here.” She rubbed nervously at the patch of shoulder her dress left bare.

“It has been awhile since I left the Imperial Center. It would do me good to have a chance of scenery,” he smiled. “Tell me more about your family. Is everyone as politically driven as you?”

“Oh, goodness, no.” Padmé shook her head. “Father’s main job is as a professor of architecture at the University of Theed and Mother’s a homemaker now, but they’re both actively involved with charity work. My sister is married to one of Father’s old students, and they have two daughters. I adore them.”

Anakin grinned. “I love children,” he said. “How did you end up becoming Queen of Naboo?”

“While I was serving as Princess of Theed, there was a recall election on King Veruna,” she explained. “Corruption charges. I was popular with the people, and I wanted to make a difference, so I ran. And I won, though barely the first time. The second term, it was a landslide. If I’d wanted, I could have had a third term, but I set the limits for a reason. Without them, nothing will actually change.”

“You were offered a seat in the Senate. You would have been amazing, why did you refuse? Now that I can remember. Many were upset you refused the invitation.”

“I knew that if I accepted it, politics would end up being my life forever. And I didn’t want that. I wanted to be able to move on, start a life that was truly mine. Start thinking about having a family. With the right person, obviously.” Padmé shrugged. “I wanted to feel like I was myself again. The Crusade is *mine*. I can give it my full attention without worrying I’m neglecting other duties. It sounds silly when I put it that way, doesn’t it?”

“No, not at all. I know how politics can consume your life and you have every right of wanting a life outside it. I respect you and envy you. I can’t think like that. For me, duty has to come above all else,” Anakin said, a small sigh escaping his lips. “I want what you want. A life. To begin a family and I want to choose it as me, Anakin, and not as the Emperor. There have been whispers behind my back about the right political alliance, the right marriage, but that is one thing I don’t want to give up to duty. I want to love the person I marry and for her to love me back for me, not for the crown.”

“I hope you find her someday,” Padmé said shyly.

“Yeah, I hope so too,” he replied quietly, biting his lower lip as a soft pink blush rose to his cheeks.

As her son was meeting with the woman she’d forbidden to see him, Shmi found herself trapped in her personal hell. An Imperial council chamber full of men telling her what to do about her son.

“Your Majesty, it’s only—”

“Rakir, how do you deal with this kind of impudence in the Army?” Shmi interrupted Mas Amedda. Her general shifted his shoulders in a casual shrug.

“This is why your late husband had the clones commissioned, your Majesty. They were engineered for following orders, they wouldn’t behave so disrespectfully.”

“All except the ones in the 501st,” Shmi teased her friend softly as one of the other men cleared his throat.

“The fact remains, Prince Anakin has nearly attained his majority, he’ll be taking the throne soon, and the Empire is only strong as long as the line of succession holds, you know this. It’s simply a matter of practicality,” the old fool pressed nervously. “There are many planets eager to strengthen an alliance with the Empire, many potential consorts, surely they deserve at least some level of consideration—”

“Apparently, I haven’t been making myself clear enough for you slugs. My son is not for sale. I am not marrying him to a preppy know-it-all Princess that is only looking for his title and money. Anakin is fine just the way it is and I swear the next person to approach me with an offer like this will get beheaded! The Empire is strong on its own. Whoever is against us always loses. I don’t need alliances based on marriages.”

“Your Majesty—”

“Have I *not* made myself clear?” Shmi hissed, fists tightening on the arms of her throne.

“The meeting is dismissed,” Rakir said with a sigh, knowing very well his Empress’ limits. “Unless one of you would like to lose their head?”

The Council members exited the chamber one by one, clearly annoyed at the inflexible Empress. They whispered to each other, muttered under her breath, which fueled Shmi’s anger further. As she was left alone with Rakir Banai, she stood up, infuriated. “Vultures. They treat my son like he’s their property.”

“They see an opportunity for growth. These are greedy men, your majesty, everything for them is an excuse to gain power and strength.”

“Anakin is not an excuse. He’s their future ruler and they should be aware that when he’s Emperor, he will call his own shots and he is not a fan of some of them. They shouldn’t cling to their power too tightly,” Shmi scowled. “Any news on the detail of the Prince?”

He nodded. “Yes. The Prince was seen accompanying Lady Naberrie through Imperial Center after their lunch was over.” Shmi’s expression darkened further. “According to our report, they seemed very taken with each other.”

“I curse the day that woman was allowed back on this planet. I want a complete and full investigation on Padmé Amidala. Since her two terms as Queen, to this pathetic little Crusade of hers. Turn every stone. I want all the leverage I can get on her.”

“She wouldn’t be a terrible choice, actually,” Rakir suggested softly. Shmi whirled on him, eyes blazing and he raised his hands defensively. “She’s clearly well liked by many in the galaxy, she doesn’t have a throne of her own to compromise putting the Empire’s best

interests first, and this is the first time Anakin has shown so much interest in any woman. If they like one another, why not see where it goes?”

“She’s changing him and while I love my son dearly, Anakin is naive and can easily be taken advantage of. She might not have a throne of her own, but I don’t believe she acts without her own agenda.” Shmi scowled. “And a woman who has refused a position at the Senate and hid herself away from Court is not a woman who is ready to become Empress. I remember Lady Nabberrie wanting to *stay away* from politics. Marrying the future Emperor goes against what she wanted to achieve with her removal from a political life.”

“Perhaps he’s changing her too.”

“I don’t believe in that kind of romanticism. It only exists in children’s stories.” Shmi said.

“Shmi, denying the boy what he wants will only make him want it more.”

“Not if she denies him,” Shmi replied. “He can’t blame me if she is the one to leave and want nothing else to do with him,” she shrugged, picking at invisible spots on her sleeves.

“We’ve been friends for a long time, Shmi. I’ll do what you ask, but I fear this will only backfire on you. It’s pointless to think you can control Anakin forever.”

“I don’t want to control him, I want to protect him while I can,” Shmi argued. “Wouldn’t you do the same for your son?”

“I trust my son to make his own decisions and accept the consequences of his actions. Kitster is his own man, not a baby.”

“Well he’s not going to be the Emperor,” Shmi said softly. “Anakin is and the consequences of his actions will be the consequences of the Empire and I have to take that into consideration.”

“Regardless of what he’s going to be, Anakin is also a twenty-year-old man who has never had a girlfriend before now. We don’t know how serious it is. Surely there’s no harm in waiting it out, at least a little while.”

“Don’t push your luck, Rakir,” the Empress warned. “Our friendship will only protect you so far.”

“I understand, Your Majesty.”

Padmé ducked her head as yet another journalist tried to get a clear shot of them. “Maybe we should have just stayed in the hotel restaurant,” she said, tugging at her sleeves nervously. “Your mother won’t like this.”

“Why are you so afraid of my mother?” Anakin chuckled as he waved at Rex to dismiss the reporters. “I didn’t even introduce you both, I think you would get along. Besides, it’s nice to walk with someone who treats me normally and not like the Prince.”

“Anakin.” Padmé bit her lip. “She’s, um, she’s the one who said I was using you.”

“What?” Anakin frowned. ‘But I didn’t even speak to my mother about you. I just noticed how I was interested in your idea, but nothing else, I... “his frown deepened.” Padmé, I’m so sorry.’ His mother was capable of such a thing, he couldn’t deny it. But this time it was crossing a line Anakin didn’t want. “She’s very protective. She thinks I need to be kept in bubble wrap until I sit on that throne, sometimes she crosses a few boundaries. I hope she didn’t scare you too much,” he sighed, dropping his shoulders.

“It’s not that,” she sighed. “I’m more concerned about the harm she could do to my cause in retaliation for me defying her. She told me to stay away from you. There are so many people who need my help, and if she wanted to, she could make it much, much harder for me to do that. And besides, on Naboo... family’s everything. I would hate to cause strife in yours.”

“You don’t know my mother very well, Padmé, she wouldn’t hurt your cause because we’re spending time together and I doubt that she meant that literally,” Anakin said carefully. “What reason would she have to tell you to stay away from me? She never did that before. I’m sure I can talk to her and clear it out. You probably misunderstood her, that’s all.”

“No, she was very clear,” Padmé sighed, bending down to pick one of the flowers growing by the fountain and twirled the stem between her fingers. “She’s under the impression that you’re pursuing me as a Consort, and I’m using that to further my agenda with the Crusade. Honestly, I don’t know how anyone stays sane in a place like this. So much backstabbing and plotting and paranoia... how do you stand it?”

Anakin hesitated. He should have known his mother would pick up on his intentions. “It’s not so bad. You can make real friends and find a purpose here. This has been my home and I have been happy here, so I can’t really complain about it all,” he said and sat by the edge of the fountain. ‘Well, I know you’re not using me for your agenda, so that should count for something.’ He added, before being silent for a long time. “So you really wouldn’t come back to court?” Anakin needed to know. If he planned on courting her, he should at least know if she would be open to the idea of returning. He couldn’t have an Empress on a different planet. “For anything?”

“Well, my plan was to spend the next year splitting time between Naboo and fieldwork. A few missions out to help with the liberation movements, more soliciting donations from the diplomats and dignitaries,” she paused to stare at the flower again, tugging at one of the petals. “Though I suppose it might make sense for me to see about getting an office or a base of some kind here on Imperial Center.”

A year. He could wait one year, if she accepted his courting. Anakin wanted to be stable on the throne before focusing his attention on a marriage and a year would be enough time for them to get to know each other. “Would you accept my invitation to have dinner at the Palace tonight? I know that you think my mother is going to hurt your cause but if we all sit down and talk as grown-ups, you’ll see that she is a good person and that she might be a very good ally. I’ll be there to stop her if she gets too intense,” he added a little smile at the end. “Please, Padmé, it’s just one dinner.”

“Um,” she swallowed. “Would you mind if it waited until my last night here? Just so I can make a quick escape in case it doesn’t go well?”

“Only if you have lunch with me again tomorrow,” he smiled brightly at her. “And then accompany me to an afternoon, informal meeting with some of the most influential leaders in the Outer Rim, due to their non-profit organizations.”

“I think I can agree to that,” she said, smiling back at him shyly. “Thank you.”

Anakin stood up and took the flower from her hand to place it in her carefully braided hair. “You’re very welcome.”

If Anakin had been nine years old, Shmi would have grounded him. As it was, she couldn’t go that far, but as she watched him from across the table, she could not hold back a biting comment. “According to the HoloNet, you have a girlfriend now?”

“It took you a whole day to make a comment about that. That’s improvement if I ever saw one,” Anakin shook his head. “She’s not my girlfriend, Mom, she’s a friend and why are you so bothered with her presence?” He sighed and took a sip of water. “Padmé told me you’ve threatened her. Is that true?”

Shmi scoffed. “She *would* say something that absurd, wouldn’t she? I knew it was only a matter of time.”

“Mom... did you or did you not tell her to stay away from me?”

“Everything I do is in your best interests, Anakin.”

Anakin leaned back in his chair. “I’m not a child anymore, Mom, I can make my own choices. If I decide to become friends with Lady Nabberrie, I will. It shouldn’t bother you so much and it *shouldn’t* be a reason for you to intimidate a perfectly innocent woman. She fears you’ll hurt her cause on purpose. Now, I’ve reassured her that would not happen. Are you going to turn me into a liar?” He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“No one is perfectly innocent, Anakin.” His mother shook her head. “It’s just a matter of how well people hide it.”

“What are you so afraid of?” Anakin narrowed his eyes. “You’re overreacting. I know you have a tendency to be overprotective, but Force, Mom, this is too much. I speak to a woman that has the making of a great Consort and you try to push her away? Why?”

“I knew it. You do think of her as more than a friend,” Shmi said, folding her arms. “So now she has you lying to me. This is exactly why I told her to keep away from you.”

“I don’t think of her as more than a friend, but it’s... you know it’s complicated and... she is not making me lie to you,” Anakin said, frustrated, slamming his fist on the table. ‘I’ve met her, officially, two days ago and I’m taken with her. That’s the truth. But I don’t even know if she wants me to Court her, Mom, you can’t assume she’s manipulating me or using me. I’m a grown man. I can defend myself. I can see if people are using me or not and Padmé is not. You have to realize that I’m not your little boy anymore,’ he pushed his chair back and stood, throwing his napkin on the table. “I’m going to spend as much time with her as she wants me to. You *have* to be okay with that, Mom. Because it’s *my* choice.”

“She’s going to break your heart, Anakin,” Shmi warned. “I am just trying to keep you safe. Even from yourself.”

“I like to think she’ll make me happy, really happy. That if it comes to it, she’ll marry me for who I am, not for the title I can offer.” It was the last thing Anakin said before storming out of the dining room. Shmi scowled as she watched her son go. Outbursts like this were exactly why she was going to do everything in her power to make certain that Padmé Naberrie didn’t stay around long enough for Anakin to propose.

3. Worst Dinner Date Ever

“How long do you think this will take, ma’am?” Teckla asked as she followed Padmé up the steps of the palace.

“It’s dinner and nothing else,” Padmé insisted, smoothing down her hair. “As soon as that’s done, we’ll be on the next shuttle home.” *Home*. Naboo, where everything made a lot more sense and didn’t feel like she was suffocating.

Kitster Banai and his father were at the top of the stairs to receive both women. Padmé noticed Kitster speaking to a commlink, although she did not hear what he said, only that there was a small, playful smile on his face.

“Lady Naberrie, Miss Minnau, welcome to the Imperial Palace,” Rakir welcomed with a short bow. “Come, I’ll show you to the dining rooms. The Empress and the Prince are awaiting your presence.”

Eagerly, Kitster added mentally, fighting back a grin.

“I’d hate to keep them waiting,” Padmé said, smiling politely as she noticed the way the Prince’s friend— Kitster, if memory served her right— was trying to hide his smirk.

“Would you like me to wait here, ma’am?” Teckla asked softly. “I know the Prince said he wanted to have it be private.”

“You could join us,” Kitster offered, turning his smile on Padmé’s assistant. “We would be more than delighted to have you.”

Rakir cleared his throat. “Kitster, that’s not really...”

“Oh, Ani won’t mind,” Kitster dismissed his father’s concerns. Teckla covered her mouth with her hand to hide a snort at the nickname, and Padmé flushed. ‘Do not tell him I call him that in public,’ he said horrified to both women. “He’ll have me arrested for treason.”

Rakir sighed and rubbed his forehead, muttering something under his breath. “Is everything alright, General Banai?” Padmé asked.

“Everything is fine, Lady Naberrie, but as you said, we should not keep the royal family waiting.”

“Of course,” Padmé nodded. “It’ll be fine, Teckla, don’t worry.”

“Worrying about you is part of my job, ma’am.” Padmé rolled her eyes as she followed the general into the palace.

“I want to be candid with you, Lady Naberrie, the Empress has asked me to investigate you. To leave no stone unturned.”

“Dad!” Kitster said, alarmed, eyes widening in shock. ‘Does Anakin know?’ He turned to Padmé before Rakir had a chance to reply. “I can assure you he didn’t, Lady Naberrie.” Then he turned back to his father. “Honestly, Dad, why?” Kitster asked baffled.

“Don’t explain any further,” Padmé said calmly. “I understand. You won’t find anything incriminating, though, General. I have nothing to hide.”

“I thought as much, but with the Empress, it is better to humor her.”

In the dining room, Anakin’s eyes glanced between the closed doors at the closed expression of his mother. For the umpteenth time that evening, he adjusted the sleeves of his suit jacket. “Mom, promise me one thing?” Shmi raised his eyebrows questioning. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice.”

“No, you’re not,” Anakin replied bluntly. “And for some unknown reason, you dislike Padmé but you have to understand that I do like her and that it would make me happy if you would get along and not look like you’re about to plan her execution,” he sighed miserably.

“General Banai and Lady Naberrie,” C-3PO announced as he opened the door. Rakir gave his usual bow, and Padmé curtsied.

“Thank you, Threepio,” Anakin said, standing. ‘My mother and I are very honored to have you dining with us tonight, Padmé.’ He turned to his Mom. “Aren’t we, Mom?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Delighted,” Shmi said, clearly clenching her teeth.

“Your majesty, your highness,” Rakir nodded one last time before leaving with Kitster and Teckla. Padmé tugged nervously at her hair.

“I’m very grateful for your generous hospitality,” she said finally.

“We are nothing but gracious hosts,” Anakin quipped and pulled her chair for her, in the seat directly across from his. “Please, have a seat. They’ll be serving the entrées soon. We decided to give you a little taste from home and request the kitchens to prepare some of the best, traditional plates of Naboo.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” Padmé blushed as she sat down.

“No, we really didn’t,” Shmi replied as she observed with a frown the way her son was acting towards Padmé before she met his angry blue eyes. “But Anakin insisted and how can you say no to that face?” Anakin rolled his eyes and went back to his assigned seat.

“With a certain amount of willpower and determination, I suppose,” Padmé said noncommittally. “Though royal authority nullifies that at times. I can’t count the number of times I had to call my sister’s house just so I could tell my nieces that they needed to eat their vegetables. It was ridiculous.”

Shmi’s eyes narrowed slightly before she leaned back, her onyx dress glittering in the dim light. “Ridiculous indeed.”

“I’m sure you had similar experiences with Anakin when he was that age,” the former Queen said innocently.

“I was well behaved,” Anakin blushed. “But it was a long time ago.”

“Not that long, sweetheart, you’re still coming into adulthood,” Shmi snickered. “Don’t you think, Lady Naberrie?”

Anakin narrowed his eyes at his Mom. Undermining him in front of the woman he was trying to impress was a low blow. Shmi only smiled innocently back at him.

“Actually, on Naboo, youth has a very high value,” Padmé said. “We believe that children have a greater sense of altruism and justice due to their innocence, they’re less likely to be corrupted by selfish desires. If he’d wanted to be King of Naboo, he could have been in his second term now, hypothetically speaking.”

“That’s very flattering, really, but I’m not a child,” he said and he had an edge to his voice and he gripped the knife he was holding tighter. ‘Even if my Mom keeps treating me as one,’ he said, passing the annoyed comment as a light-hearted quip. “Anyway,” he sighed, turning his attention to Padmé. “When can we expect to have you back at the Imperial Center, Padmé? You’re heading to Naboo tomorrow, right?”

“Tonight, actually, after dinner,” Padmé corrected. “I know it’s only been a week, but I’m awfully homesick. I need to go home. Especially since I plan to be very busy for the next year or so with the efforts to continue liberating those in bondage.”

“How about settling down, Lady Naberrie, do you have plans?” Shmi asked as the first course of their meal was served. “I mean, after two terms as Queen and now with your bustling Crusade, one has to wonder where the personal life is left at. I’m sure you are not lacking suitors.”

“I would love to meet the right person and start a family with them, but at this juncture in my life, I feel that I’m still too closely linked with my royal image for someone to really see *me*,” Padmé said, lowering her eyes slightly. “Everyone assumes Amidala of the Crusade is me, but it’s actually the Galactic Basic spelling of a High Priestess of Shiraya. She was a patroness of the lost and the hopeless.”

“So you strive to emulate such admirable qualities.” It was hard to miss the sarcasm in Shmi’s voice.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with wanting to make the galaxy a better place.”

“I agree and I find that the more people fight for the Galaxy, the more willpower there will be to actually improve,” Anakin interjected. “That is why I am showing my full support to Padmé’s cause, Mom, and if you *allow* Padmé to explain to you the work she wants to accomplish, you’ll agree.”

“If we support every single cause that we are introduced to, Anakin, the Empire won’t strive and while I do agree with improving the Galaxy, we have so much more to consider,” Shmi argued. “As a former Queen, Lady Naberrie, you certainly understand the responsibilities of the job while keeping in mind that we are not just responsible for one planet, but for the entire Galaxy.”

“And as the Empress, you should be able to see the benefits. We’re talking about many skilled laborers that will need employment when they’re freed.” Padmé set aside her cutlery and started ticking items off on her fingers. “Higher employment means higher tax revenue as more consumers mean more products are being made. Which in turn means that more jobs are required. The people I am talking about live in horrendous conditions, do near-fatal labor. Many of the jobs that are currently considered too menial for most, they will gladly take if it means there is no longer a bomb in their body or whips over their backs. Additionally, you’d

be cutting off a huge resource for the various organizations that make a profit on the slave trade.”

“Like Zygerria,” Anakin said bitterly.

“Anakin, Miraj Scintel is nothing for you to worry about,” Shmi scolded. “Don’t be absurd.”

“She’s one of the greatest offenders,” Padmé said, “I think she is someone for everyone to worry about. Selfish, ambitious people are what ruin life for everyone else.”

“Mom, you can’t deny that Miraj is more trouble than what she is worth. Not to mention her sick obsession with me,” Anakin pointed out, with a frown. “I believe Zygerria would be a much better place and ally if we took some action to control Miraj’s whims.”

“Wouldn’t that just make me a tyrant?” Shmi asked snidely.

“Not when it’s Zygerria we’re talking about,” Anakin mumbled.

“This isn’t a Republic anymore,” Padmé said, her face a neutral mask. “Doesn’t that mean you’re allowed to be one?”

“While I am allowed to be a tyrant, Lady Naberrie, I don’t wish to become one and be compared to my late husband,” Shmi replied. “Zygerria has been a faithful ally.”

“Then you need better allies before the ones you currently have stab you in the back.”

“That is my concern, not yours,” the Empress replied with a scowl.

“I live in this galaxy, I have as much right to be concerned as any other citizen,” Padmé said, taking a sip of her wine. “I’ve done quite a bit of research into Zygerria. You know all about that kind of thing, don’t you, your majesty?”

Shmi’s eyes flashed. “I know it quite well,” she said coldly. “Why haven’t I done anything about it?” She guessed. “It’s not as simple as you all imagine. Zygerria has powerful allies that would quickly rally against the Empire and we do not need another war. Do I turn a blind eye? Of course not. The Queen has made some compromises, just like I have. Like I said, I can’t take her planet by force, I am not a tyrant.”

“But maybe we could do more,” Anakin said, a bit more calmly. “Padmé’s Crusade could help ease some of the slavery trades that happen between the Hutts and Zygerria and we have powerful allies too that would certainly side with us if a war should erupt.”

“Compromises only work when both parties in the agreement are honorable,” Padmé pointed out lightly.

“I appreciate your input, Lady Naberrie, and will take it under advisement,” Shmi said, her tone final and Anakin sighed knowing that that was Shmi’s way of ending the discussion. He had hoped this dinner would be pleasant, but no, the two of them were not getting along or showed signs of wanting it.

“How’s the food?” Anakin asked after a few minutes of awkward silence.

“Wonderful,” Padmé said, finally smiling again. “My compliments to your kitchen staff.”

"They will be given. After dinner and before you rush out, I would like to give you a tour of the Palace?"

"Well, I don't know what the schedule is from the spaceport," Padmé said hesitantly. "We've already checked out of our hotel."

"You can leave at whatever time you want. They won't say no to me. There is an interior garden I would like to show you. My father had it made to resemble a part of Naboo's natural landscape, you'll love it, I'm sure," Anakin persuaded, adding a loving smile at the end. "Please?"

"I don't want to take advantage of you," Padmé insisted, glancing at the Empress nervously.

"You're not. Or is she, Mom?" He challenged.

"I think I'll finish my supper in my office," Shmi said, ignoring the question as she stood. "Clearly, you two have decided how you want to proceed, I would rather get the work of running this Empire done than be ignored."

"Don't exaggerate, Mom," Anakin sighed. "You're welcome to join us if you want?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I think not." Shmi stood. "Good night, Anakin. Lady Naberrie." And without another word, she swept out of the room, C-3PO rushing off to follow her.

"My lady! My lady, do wait for me, please!" he called worriedly.

"That was not terrible, was it?" Clearly, he was trying to hold in his laughter.

"Speak for yourself, I think she's planning to shoot down my ship as soon as I leave orbit!" Padmé said, burying her face in her hands.

Anakin barked out a laugh and his whole body shook with laughter. "Oh, come on, she's tough but not heartless. I imagined worse. She could have tackled you the moment you defied her," he smirked and pushed his chair back. "Come on, we'll have dessert at the gardens," he grinned, offering her his hand.

"Alright, if you say so," Padmé accepted his hand and stood. "Any chance it's shuura fruit?"

"Don't ruin the surprise," he chuckled tugging her out into the hallway.

"Oh, so I'm right." She laughed a little as she followed him down the corridor. "You have good taste."

"From the first time you made me taste it, it easily became my favorite dessert," he admitted.

"That was two days ago!"

"I've had it for several meals that are not dessert since then," he snickered.

"Oh, so that's why your mother really hates me. I've ruined your diet."

“Clearly, my pants barely fit me anymore,” he joked. “She doesn’t hate you, she has problems sharing.”

“You make it sound like you’re her property.”

“I’ve been all of her life, she doesn’t see herself letting me go without a fight,” he chuckled. “She’ll come around. I promise.”

“Come around to what, exactly?”

Anakin hesitated for a second. “Helping your Crusade, of course,” he smiled innocently. “We’re here,” he announced.

“Oh, it’s *wonderful*,” Padmé said, stepping into the lush greenery. “It looks exactly like the Lake Country, and...” she paused to inhale. “Smells like it too.”

“I spent hours playing here when I was a child,” Anakin followed her. “It’s one of my favorite places in the Palace. Shall we?” He waved at a nearby table with their dessert already served.

“We shall,” she nodded, taking a seat. “I feel so bad for that poor droid, I’m sure your mother keeps him very busy.”

“Threepio likes to be busy,” Anakin grinned, sitting down close to her. “I made him for her to help her out with her affairs when I was nine. I felt so helpless that I wanted to do *something* so I created Threepio.”

“You were *nine* and you made him?” Padmé’s eyes widened as she took one of the fruit-topped cakes. “That’s very impressive.”

He blushed. “I speak binary,” he shrugged. “Droids and mechanics are second nature to me. Always were. It’s a hobby of mine, to distract myself from this whole reality we live in.”

“I don’t remember having hobbies like that,” Padmé mused between bites. “When I wasn’t at school or helping Father with the Refugee Relief Movement, I was studying. I enjoyed it, though.”

“My studies heavily relied on tutors. Fortunately, Kitster was always with me, so I had a friend through it all. Even if sometimes we behaved like total brats.”

“You got to have Jedi studies, didn’t you?” she asked. “I mean, I understand that you weren’t allowed to join the Order, but they had a master train you?”

“Obi-Wan Kenobi, yes, he has been putting up with me since his Master’s death. Qui-Gon Jinn was my first tutor.”

Padmé nearly choked on her mouthful of cake. “You’re joking. Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi were the Jedi sent to bring me here during the Naboo blockade.”

“They are the best Jedi I’ve known. Well, Qui-Gon was. I liked him very much, his loss was awful on everyone. But I like to think Obi-Wan and I are as close as brothers,” Anakin smiled. “Even if I annoy the hell out of him just because I like riling him up,” he smirked.

“You’re terrible,” she gasped, eyes wide. “Poor Obi-Wan!”

Anakin laughed. "It's funny. Have you ever seen him angry? He starts flailing his arms around, shouting at me. One time I flew a speeder through the Imperial Center and I like to fly fast... and he doesn't. He was very pale when we finally reached our destination," he smirked, biting into the fruit.

"I think that's very unfair, he can't exactly punish you when you're the future Emperor," Padmé scolded. "I think you're better than that."

"He doesn't care about me being the future Emperor. He punishes me just fine," he made a face. "If you talk with him, he'll tell you just that."

"I don't want to talk with him. Not when you're more interesting."

Anakin blushed while fighting a huge grin. "I'm glad you think so. You are certainly much more interesting than Obi-Wan as well," he chuckled. "You know... this has been a really great week in your company and I'm really sad that you'll be leaving so soon."

"I've enjoyed it too," she confessed softly. "Apart from your mother threatening me, I mean. There's something different about this place. I feel like I've been knocked out of orbit and now I'm caught between two different forces of gravity."

He got a few inches closer. "I feel the same in a way and it's... because of your presence," he admitted, sapphire blue eyes very intense. "You're... different. But a good different. You don't look at me as the heir."

"Anakin," she whispered and she started to lean upwards when a loud siren started blaring, and she pulled back. "What's happening?"

Anakin blinked like he had been woken up of a daydream. He was *this* close to kissing her. "I don't know, but stay with me, I'm sure it's being handled."

"Anakin!" Kitster shouted, running frantically into the gardens and Anakin groaned. "*Anakin!*"

"What?" Anakin barked, annoyed at the way they were being interrupted.

"There's... blockade... Whole planet..." Kitster gasped, bracing himself against the table. "Zygerrians. Must be every ship they have..."

"What? That's insane! Why would they even try a move like that on *us*?"

"It's a power play," Padmé said grimly, rubbing her hands together. "Like the one Gunray tried to use on me. The Empire has something Miraj Scintel wants."

Kitster nodded and Anakin shook his head. "Besides having more power than them? I don't see what Miraj Scintel would want from the Empire."

"You," his mother's calm voice startled the trio and they turned to the Empress. "Miraj Scintel wants you."

Anakin's chin dropped. "Oh, I'm going to be sick," he muttered in shock.

"She's blocking communications, isn't she?" Padmé asked hollowly. "You can't get in contact with the Imperial Armada."

Shmi nodded. "Scintel is aware that you are coming of age and you will soon have a crown on your head. She wants to be your Consort."

"Ew," Kitster grimaced.

"That's *not* happening!" Anakin said in a shrill voice and he suddenly grabbed Padmé's hand unconsciously. Shmi's eye twitched but she said nothing. "Over my dead body!"

"Of course I'm not letting that happen, Anakin," Shmi reassured him. 'But the fact is... right now... the Imperial City is surrounded. Kitster, you should go and help your father find a way to get our communications through.' Kitster nodded and with one last grim look at his best friend, disappeared. "Lady Naberrie... apparently, you're our guest for an indefinite amount of time."

"I will do what I can to help you combat this, your Majesty," Padmé promised gravely. "No one should be made to feel like property. Especially when it's something as personal as marriage."

"I'll handle this, Lady Naberrie," Shmi said coldly, somehow the words of the younger woman affecting her more deeply than she realized. "Do not step a foot outside this Palace, Anakin Skywalker, or I'll swear to the Force..."

"I'll stay put, I'll stay put," Anakin nodded eagerly, eyes wide with concern. Shmi gave the couple a charged glance, before exiting and leaving the pair alone again. "Padmé... I'm sorry," he turned to her with a sigh, but he didn't look very regretful. The truth was that Miraj's blockade was giving them a reason to have more time alone together and he couldn't complain.

"You have nothing to apologize for, this is not your fault," Padmé sighed. "But this goes deeper than I think your mother is willing to admit. There must be a traitor, someone who worked with Miraj to compromise your defenses."

"I will share your concerns with Rakir. I'm sure he'll follow them through and find the traitor. Meanwhile, and since we are not leaving so soon, would you like to finish the rest of our dessert? I'll request the aids to prepare you and Miss Minnau some of our most comfortable rooms."

"That's incredibly kind of you, thank you," Padmé said, shifting awkwardly. "Anakin, what happened before the alarms, it was... I don't know what it was."

Anakin squeezed her hand that he still held. "I can't tell you with any certainty of what it was, but..." he pursed his lips as he tugged her closer to him. She was so petite and fit so well with his frame. "I really wanted to kiss you before that annoying sound interrupted us," he confessed in a whisper.

"I haven't been kissed in a long time," she whispered, her voice sounding very far away. "I've almost forgotten everything about the feeling."

He moved his hands to her waist and pulled her even closer, brushing his lips against hers, one hand rose to cup the side of her face. "Do you want me to kiss you?" His voice was a whisper that she only heard because there was no distance between them.

“If I said yes, what would happen after?” She asked, so close that her nose rubbed against his. “Your mother, the blockade...”

“Let’s see,” he smiled briefly, before his lips were on hers, delicate at first, innocent. He sighed against her mouth happily, as his arms wrapped themselves around her waist and he deepened the kiss.

Padmé’s hand slid up to his cheek as she leaned into the kiss, squeezing her eyes shut as her tongue curiously poked into his mouth. Anakin moaned and took it as a sign to proceed further, massaging her tongue with his. He wasn’t experienced. All he had done so far were a few kisses with a few of Kitster’s more extroverted friends and it was always at parties his friend like to throw. He’d never had a solid, long-lasting relationship. In truth, Padmé had been the only woman who had gotten him thinking about courtship.

Padmé pulled back, nervously tucking her hair back into place. “I must... the wine... I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“But I do,” Anakin replied, licking his lips. ‘If you want, we can forget this ever happened.’ He whispered, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “I did, however, enjoyed kissing you very much.”

“I enjoyed it too,” she admitted, blushing scarlet. “And I don’t want to forget it, I’m just suddenly scared, and excited, and confused, and... I don’t know!”

Anakin kissed her again, cradling her face between his hands. While he was horrified with Miraj’s request, he had to thank the Queen for her blockade. It had given him more time with Padmé and the burst of adrenaline from her threats were making him move faster than what he had anticipated. Breaking the kiss, he smiled. “I’m looking forward to spending the next couple of days with you. Whatever this is... is worth it. I feel the electricity as we touch... don’t you?”

“I guess I’m just afraid of getting burned,” she said, but her eyes sparkled slightly. “Can I trust you not to let me?”

“You can trust me. With everything... Angel.” Padmé blushed and leaned up to kiss him again.

4. Deals, Ultimatums, and Choices

“Nothing?!?” Shmi hissed furiously. “We have been in this blockade for a *month*, and you still have nothing, Rakir?”

“As I said, your Majesty, we are still assessing the amount of sabotage and looking for the traitor while we try to get a signal through to our forces,” Rakir explained patiently. He knew that the Empress’ anger was justified, but it wasn’t just about him. Her grudge against Padmé Naberrie had only grown stronger with each passing day of the siege. “Whoever did this was very thorough.”

“*Find* a way out of this blockade, Rakir. I am *not* giving up my son to *that* monster and I would like Lady Naberrie to return to her planet as soon as possible,” Shmi shouted. “Get me that traitor’s head. I am exhausted not knowing who I can trust,” she pointed out. “Where the *kriff* is Anakin, by the way? Haven’t I requested his presence already?”

“You know where he is, your majesty,” Rakir said calmly. “You forbid him from leaving the palace.”

“I don’t want him to *leave* the Palace, I want him by my side while we handle this mess. He’s the future Emperor, he shouldn’t be cowering in a room.”

Rakir cleared his throat, fighting back a teasing smile. “He’s not cowering, he’s seizing the opportunity to be with Padmé. They have grown extremely close and is very hard to take him away from her side.”

On the arm of her chair, Shmi’s knuckles turned white. “That little *whore*.”

“I don’t know if he has bedded her already, but it can’t be too far away,” Rakir quipped. “He clearly loves her, your majesty, what is so fundamentally wrong with Padmé Naberrie?”

“She’s not good enough for him.”

“She is the former Queen of Naboo. Highly respected across the Galaxy. Many would say she is worth becoming the future Empress of the Galaxy,” Rakir argued.

“Many don’t know what it takes to be Empress of the Galaxy,” Shmi snapped. “Or what is best for my son. That little martyr doesn’t have the spine to do what I do.”

“Shmi,” Rakir began, dropping all formality. “We’ve known each other for many, many years. Our sons grew up together. I know you. I know that that is not all you have against her, it’s not reason enough for such deep hatred. Anakin is *happy*. Everyone can see that. He’s the happiest he’s ever been and *no one* will be surprised if he announces his courtship after we’re done with the blockade.”

“It’s a childish crush that will end in heartbreak,” insisted the Empress. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“Promise me you won’t break your son’s heart, Shmi. Trust him. He’s going to be Emperor soon. He’ll call his own shots. If she makes him happy, it is your responsibility as a parent to

endure whatever grudge you have and swallow it. I would do it for Kitster.”

“Your son will never be Emperor, Rakir. That is the difference between you and I.”

Rakir sighed. “As you wish, your majesty. I hope you are right, because I would hate to see the future of this Empire if you break the future Emperor before he even rises to the throne,” he turned on his heel and left.

Shmi sank back in her seat, scowling. “C-3PO, open a comm to Queen Miraj. Now.” She would have to deal with the more dangerous pest before she got rid of the far more annoying one.

While the Empress Regent was stewing in her rage, her son was in the palace gardens, lying on a plush blanket with Padmé Naberrie beneath him. Their picnic lunch lay to the side, completely forgotten as they were getting lost in the taste of each other’s mouths. “When you come to Naboo,” Padmé gasped in between kisses, “I’ll show you the Lake Country and we can see how it compares.”

“I’m sure it’s far more beautiful,” Anakin said breathlessly, kissing down her neck and over her cleavage. “But it will pale in comparison to you. Everything does.”

“Ani!” she gasped, pulling away to get her pink dress back into place as she laughed. “You’re so bad!”

Anakin pouted as she covered herself. “What if you spend tonight in my room?” He suggested, kissing the sensitive spot behind her ear that he knew made her tremble. “I think we know each other well enough. It’s been a whole month. It’s a wonder how you’re not sick of me yet,” he chuckled against her skin.

Padmé’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking.”

He raised his head and you could see the lust darkening his usual clear, blue orbs. “Depends. Do you want me to be joking?”

“It’s just,” she swallowed nervously, “it’ll probably sound silly, but I wanted my first time to be my wedding night.”

“Oh,” he said slowly. ‘It’s not silly at all,’ he smiled slowly, caressing her cheek. “I can respect that.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling back as she put her hand over his and moved it to her lips so she could kiss the palm. “Now, where were we?”

“Heavily making out and I almost took your dress off,” he smirked. “Padmé...can I ask you a serious question?”

“Will I have to give you a serious answer?” she teased, ruffling his hair.

“Yes,” he nodded, chuckling at her teasing. “If I asked to court you... officially... would you accept it?” He was suddenly very shy, choosing to look at the hand that played with one of her perfect curls.

“Would you be willing to let me keep working on the Crusade?” she said, answering his question with a question.

Anakin raised his head. “Of course I would. It’s your initiative, it’s only fair that you keep pushing it forward. I don’t want someone by my side as a prop, Padmé, I want someone that wants to make a change. Like you.”

She bit her lip thoughtfully. “You’d have to go to Naboo and get my parents’ permission too. And I probably wouldn’t be able to stay in Imperial Center the entire time at first, but... For you, I could make it work.”

Anakin nodded along her requests. “I have no problem asking your parents for permission, if I’m doing things officially, I’ll do them right and courtship will probably be for a year and... will you agree to be my Consort then?” He grinned widely, blue eyes shining with excitement.

“Ask me again in a year,” she told him, kissing his cheek. “I’m not committing to anything until you’ve seen the worst of me.”

“I don’t think anything would dissuade me from my decision,” he said eagerly. “What if instead of asking you again in a year, we’ll make it official in a year?” He countered. “We take this year to travel. You for your Crusade. Me for the beginning of my reign. We get to have more time just for us before we have to share our relationship with the public. I don’t want to ask again, I want you to be mine from now on.”

“I’d hate to miss your coronation,” she pointed out, her brow furrowing thoughtfully. “Maybe we could go public then? You haven’t set an official date yet.”

“No, I haven’t. I’ll turn twenty-one first and then the date will be selected. Ideally, according to the Council, when I have a Consort, which it’s perfect because then I can do everything. Become Emperor and ask you to become my Empress,” he kissed her sweetly.

“I’ll consider it,” she said, smiling against his lips just as Teckla rushed into the gardens, and Padmé pulled away, suppressing a swear. “What is it?”

“I was looking for you and I overheard the Empress talking with Miraj Scintel on a commlink,” her assistant blurted out. “She invited the Queen here. Tonight.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have ignored her request of having me glue to her side today,” Anakin scowled. Padmé grabbed his hand as a sign of reassurance.

“She can’t be accepting those threats, can she?”

“I don’t know, ma’am, I didn’t get the chance to hear anything else before I saw troopers coming,” Teckla said apologetically.

“My Mom would never agree with Miraj’s terms. She wouldn’t sell me out like that,” Anakin narrowed his eyes. “Besides, she hates to be blackmailed. If I was Miraj, I would be careful tonight.”

“Anakin.” Padmé’s hands tightened on his. “What if... what if we resolved the issue right now? Made it so that she couldn’t be your Consort.”

“That would imply me marrying someone right now, become unavailable,” Anakin sighed before it dawned on him. “Are you... saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I know it doesn’t make sense, given everything I just said, but I can’t bear the thought of you being entrapped by her,” Padmé explained. “And if it doesn’t work out between us, we can divorce amicably, can’t we?”

“We can, but I would rather not,” he smiled shyly. “Because I would hate to miss out on a life with you.”

“Save it for the wedding vows,” Kitster quipped, joining them. “Miraj is scheduled to have dinner with your Mom tonight so if you two want to do this, I suggest doing it in the early hours of the morning and before Shmi Skywalker realizes what’s happening.”

Anakin nodded. “Kitster’s right.”

“I’ll make sure to have a Pontifex. Teckla will handle the documentation. Right?” Kitster asked.

“Leave it to me,” Teckla grinned. “Let’s get you two highnesses married.”

“I will not settle for less, Empress,” Miraj said, folding her arms and staring coldly at Shmi. “You cannot convince me like you do those fools in your Senate.”

“Your terms are ridiculous,” Shmi said. “You should have known we would never bend to your will.”

“I have the full force of the Zygerrian Empire keeping an impenetrable barrier around your pathetic Imperial Center, Empress, how much longer do you think you can survive without supplies?”

Shmi gave the other woman a cold, half-smile before taking a sip of her wine and another bite of her dinner. “You underestimate me, Miraj,” she said lowly. “Many have made that mistake and suffered in the past. I’ve called you here for us to find a peaceful middle ground for both of our Empires,” Shmi said. “Although, mine is bigger than yours and I haven’t shot you down from the sky already because then I would have to spend credits cleaning you off my streets.”

“I will not be denied what I want,” the younger queen insisted petulantly as she took a drink of her own. “It’s to both of our benefits, two mighty empires joined, you could finally see the last resistant systems brought to heel. Think of it!”

“If you think I would give you my son like that, you don’t know me. You don’t know *him*. Anakin has a far worse temperament than I do and trust me, you wouldn’t want to cross him,” Shmi stood and grabbed the bottle of wine, she had dismissed servants for the night. “He’s distracted right now and your blockade has given him exactly what he wanted, that’s why he’s so quiet. Boys will be boys when we let them play with their favorite toy for a little while longer,” she poured Miraj another glass of wine.

“The brat from Naboo?” the Zygerrian asked, her lip curling in disdain. “Disgusting, preachy thing. What I wouldn’t give for her to try and come into my Empire, I’d let her join

the skugs her little heart bleeds for.”

“Another time, perhaps,” Shmi said lightly, grabbing her own glass. “I will toast to one thing. Getting you off my planet. If you do it now, I will let you live to rule your miserable people the rest of your miserable days.”

“Not without my Prince,” Miraj insisted. “If you will not give me what I want, Empress, I will take him. I do not care who is in my way.”

“Your Prince,” Shmi mused, disgusted as she took a long sip from her wine, which encouraged the other Queen to do the same. ‘You’re delusional. I have given you a way out but since it was so rudely denied, you can’t say I didn’t warn you,’ the Empress sighed and returned to her seat, calmly. “You should start feeling the consequences soon.”

“Not before I starve you into submission,” Miraj threatened as she rose from her seat. “I shall enjoy taking your crown from you.”

Shmi laughed, coldly, continuing her dinner. “If you survive the night,” she said to herself, amused. “You should have known better than use *my son* as a bargaining chip, Miraj. I am merciful in a lot of things, but not when it comes to hurting my boy.”

The Zygerrian Queen scoffed and stormed out, slamming the door behind her. Shmi merely smiled maliciously. The Quell poison would take effect before the night was out, and then she could turn her attention back to Padmé Naberrie.

“Not exactly normal to have the wedding night before the wedding,” Padmé teased as Anakin pressed her against the wall of his bedroom.

“We’re not exactly being traditional anyway, are we?” Anakin chuckled before pressing sweet kisses down her jawline and the pale column of her throat, before brushing his lips over her cleavage.

“Not at all,” she admitted, shuddering as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Neither can I, but I won’t complain. I’m way too happy,” he laughed before kissing her passionately, pulling back moments later. “I remembered something. Are you taking any form of contraceptives? Although I liked we moved so quickly to get betrothed, we don’t want to go down *that* road just yet.”

She blushed, shaking her head. “Do you?”

“There’s always contraceptives in my fresher,” he blushed. “It’s... kind of a rule. If I decide to get too adventurous, neither my Mom or the Council wants a bastard child running around,” he shrugged.

“Have you been adventurous, your highness?” she teased, nibbling at his ear.

Anakin bit his lower lip. “No... you are... er...” he cleared his throat, clearly embarrassed. “You’re... you’re kind of my... my first.”

“Good,” Padmé murmured, moving her lips down to his neck. “First and only. For both of us.”

“I like that idea. A *lot*.” He sighed as he briefly closed his eyes at the contact of her lips on his skin. “At least, you know, if we do something wrong, the other won’t have any base of comparison,” he smirked, and she giggled.

“You are so bad. I love it.”

“I love *you*,” he whispered, brushing his lips against hers. “You can use the fresher and take the contraceptives. I’ll wait for you out here.”

Padmé nodded, quietly grateful for the brief opportunity for privacy as she slipped inside the fresher. This had all been her idea, technically, but to hear Anakin say he loved her made it almost painfully real. There was no going back from something like this.

Slowly, she started undoing her dress, then took the box of contraceptives, and read the instructions. Removing one of the little round packets and emptying it into her mouth, she grimaced at the taste of the supplement. It felt dusty and irritating in her mouth, and she filled her hands with water from the sink to wash it down.

If this was what falling in love was, she didn’t dislike it. But the sheer amount of change was frightening. What if they were caught, what if it just made her a target for Miraj’s ire?

No, she couldn’t think like that. It wasn’t helpful.

After she disappeared into the fresher, Anakin felt his stomach drop and he began pacing. It was such a huge step! He didn’t mind, he loved her after all. He loved her. He had said it, hadn’t he? One month and a few weeks were enough to know it. If this was what love felt like... the rush of excitement, the sun rising and setting in only one person, the electricity... he didn’t mind, he liked it, he *loved* it. Anakin didn’t know if he should undress completely or not, if he should sit down or lay down. This was his first time and he honest to the Force, had no idea of what he was doing. He had heard Kitster speak about it, his friend was much more *friendly* and *given* that what he was or could afford to be. He choose just to remove his jacket and boots. If Padmé walked out and saw him completely naked, it might freak her out.

As he finally sat on the bed. He thought about the next morning. About eloping. He knew his mother was going to be *furios* but she had given him no choice. Padmé was who he wanted by his side and his Mom had some kind of personal fight with her, and Anakin didn’t know why. Who could hate Padmé?! After they were married, he knew they were going to have a rough patch with their families. He was sure Padmé’s father would be less than impressed and the Galaxy would immediately jump to the idea of a pregnancy, one of the reasons he had to insist on contraceptives.

They could overcome anything together. At that moment, the fresher door opened, and Padmé nervously stepped back out, holding her dress closed. “H-hi.”

“Force, don’t be nervous, I’m already nervous for the both of us,” he laughed awkwardly. “I’m pretty sure I’m going to mess up.”

“Do you think that means we shouldn’t do this just yet?” she asked, tugging nervously at her hair.

“No, no, it means I want to make this something we can remember in a positive way and not like... the most awkward, embarrassing thing,” he chuckled. “But I want you,” Anakin lowered his voice to a whisper.

“I think those contraceptives might be poison, they certainly taste like it,” she said, trying to make a joke out of it as she stepped toward him.

“I wouldn’t know,” he smiled and as she neared him, he tugged her hand forward so she was straddling him. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She leaned in and kissed him softly, her fingers slipping into his hair. He deepened the kiss, arms around her waist, leaving no space between them. ‘I love you.’ It slipped out unbidden, and she pulled back, blushing. “I... wow.”

“I know,” he grinned, madly, before claiming her lips once more, a sudden burst of passion awakening his instincts as he stood, holding her, before turning to lay her on the soft bed. “It feels right, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” she gasped, letting the dress fall open to reveal the corset beneath. “Oh, Force, yes .”

Biting his lower lip as he looked at her corset, an idea popped into his mind. He kissed each curve of her breasts, almost spilling out from the corset and slowly, using the Force, began unlacing the corset. Capturing her lips into a searing kiss, his hands came under her skirts to caress her thighs.

Padmé’s entire face wrinkled inwards as she concentrated and a warmth began to blossom inside him, the faintest hint of the Force.

Anakin pulled back, surprised. “You’re a Force user?”

She just smiled, kissing his neck. “I’ll tell you all about it later, love.”

He shuddered. “You’re amazing,” he whispered as her corset finally came undone. Anakin pulled the fabric away from her body and delighted himself with the sight of her body. Padmé reached down and casually ripped her underwear, pulling it off and tossing it aside with a grin.

“I’m ready,” she promised. Anakin smiled as he kissed down the valley of her breasts, over her navel and tugged the rest of the fabric from the skirts away. He was guided purely by instinct. Padmé’s hips rose to meet his as she gasped his name and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

“Could I try something?” Anakin asked, already on his knees and kissing her inner thigh.

“Go ahead, anything you want,” she whispered.

To do what he was about to, Anakin was grateful for Kitster’s detailed adventures. At the time, Anakin had told his friend it was too much information but now he had to thank him. He brushed his lips against her womanhood, before licking her slowly, tentatively.

Padmé squealed, squirming in delight as her hands fell away. “*Ani!*” There was the sound of his sheets ripping as her nails dug into them.

Well, he had to be doing something right. He placed her legs over his shoulders and dedicated the next couple of minutes to discover just how his tongue and lips could tease her, affect her, taste her. “Oh, *Force!*” Padmé gasped, her legs locking and pulling him in as she writhed against him. Anakin was encouraged and increased the pressure of his tongue over her clit, hands climbing over her body to squeeze her perfectly shaped breasts. ‘First time?’ she teased breathlessly. “You seem to know exactly what you’re doing.”

He pulled back, kissing the inside of her thigh, body shaking with laughter. “Kitster shares too much. Would you like to finish now?”

“Don’t you want a turn first?” she teased.

“We have all night, Angel.” He smirked climbing over her again.

“Cute as that is, Anakin, I like it when you say my *name*,” she informed him, pressing a kiss to the spot behind his ear.

“Hmm, Lady Naberrie?” Anakin teased as he rocked his hips forward against hers.

Padmé huffed, reaching down to grab his member with a smirk of her own. “You think you’re funny, don’t you, *Your Highness?*”

All the muscles of his stomach tensed as he bit his lower lip and held back a groan. “Don’t be mean, *Padmé*,” he whispered her name with reverence, brushing his lips against her jawline. He placed his hand over hers and guided it up and down, so she was gently stroking the length of his shaft.

“*Anakin*,” she murmured, lowering her mouth to capture his as her fingers guided him to her clit. “Now, love. Now.”

For his first time, Anakin knew he wouldn’t be able to last as long as he would like and he would have been more embarrassed if she had more experience than him. He felt his orgasm build as her actions picked up the pace and her own breathless moans caused by his own doing made him lose it and he felt his orgasm rip through his body as her name fell from his lips like a prayer. Padmé’s legs locked around his waist, keeping him tightly inside her as she rode his climax directly into her own. “Yes,” she whispered, rubbing her cheek against his affectionately.

Anakin turned his head to kiss her cheek as his thrust began to slow down. “I think we can easily improve,” he smiled wickedly. “With *practice*. A lot of it.”

“That’s what honeymoons are for,” she answered automatically with a grin, using her weight to spin them so that she was above him now. “Let’s try this next.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Let’s try everything,” he grinned pulling her down to kiss her sensely.

Padmé awoke in Anakin’s arms to the first strains of the morning light. Smiling softly, she ran a hand through his hair before carefully disentangling herself from his arms— thankfully, he was a heavy sleeper— and retrieved her dress from the floor, hastily pulling it on as she

slipped out into the hallway to return to her own room, where Teckla would undoubtedly be waiting with a fresh gown.

It was her wedding day. The thought was simultaneously thrilling and terrifying. “Teckla, did you find something?” she asked as she pushed open the door of her guest suite.

“I know I did.” Sitting on Padmé’s very tidy bed was the Empress, dressed in crimson and black and sneering at her coldly. “You lying, filthy little bitch.”

“Your majesty,” Padmé stammered, backing up against the door. “I swear, it’s not what you think.”

“Did you *not* just spent the night whoring yourself to my son?” Shmi stood up, anger oozing off of her. “What is your plan? To get pregnant and become his Consort? Empress?”

“We’re in love,” Padmé insisted. “We just... I suggested it so that Miraj’s attempts wouldn’t have a point, and then it just kind of happened, but it’s real. This is not about the Crusade, or anything else, just us. I swear.”

“You suggested, how nice of you,” Shmi said in a fake sweet voice. ‘Miraj is taken care of,’ she snapped. “So your little suggestion is not going to come to light. There will be *no* wedding. *No* relationship. Love? Just about *us*? This is not a child’s fairytale, you fool, you don’t magically fall in love in a *month*. You don’t know each other, you love the idea of one another,” she seethed.

Padmé swallowed. “We’ve left it open to divorce, your Majesty, but you can’t... you can’t stop us. We’re both adults.”

“You are not ruining my son’s reputation. It’s bad enough you have tricked him into bedding you,” Shmi gritted her teeth. ‘You really want to challenge me, Lady Naberrie?’ The Empress raised her eyebrows. “The last woman who did so, did not fare very well.”

“All I want is for us to be able to coexist for the sake of someone we both love!” Padmé pleaded desperately. ‘Whatever I did to make you hate me, I’m sorry for it, but I’m not going to turn my back on Anakin!’ Then the words hit her. “What do you mean?”

“Do *not* claim to love *my son* as much as *I* love him,” Shmi raised her voice. “I am willing to negotiate with you,” she said, walking towards the window. What she was doing was to provide her son with the best possible options and not settle for the first good looking face he saw. Anakin loved the idea of the angelic and innocent former Queen of Naboo, but Shmi knew better.

“I’m not interested,” Padmé said, moving to her wardrobe. If she couldn’t find Teckla, she’d just wear something old. Anakin wouldn’t care. “I’m marrying Anakin, whether you want me to, or not.”

Shmi’s nostrils flared at the girl’s defiance. “The Zygerrian Queen has perished during the night. Right now, the Zygerrian Empire is without a ruler. I have one of two options,” she began, knowing that Padmé couldn’t be bought with credits, or titles. Shmi knew her pathetic, weak spot. “I can either provide your Crusade with the sufficient power to help the millions of lives in Zygerria and eradicate slavery there once and for all, or...” she turned to Padmé, with a neutral expression. “Or I can support Scintel’s Ambassador in his run for power and let the planet be what it always was. A slave trade haven.”

“You would endanger millions of lives just to keep me away from your son?” the former Queen asked in disbelief. “You’re *insane*. That’s monstrous.”

“The planet wouldn’t know the difference from one ruler to the next. I have more ways to manipulate the Ambassador than I had with Miraj. He’s a puppet.” Shmi shrugged. “I am not the monster, Lady Naberrie. But you have a choice to make. If you decide to accept my proposal, your ship is ready to depart. If you refuse... well, I guess you will have to live with the knowledge that you could have been the name responsible for ending one of the biggest slavery problems of the Outer Rim and... you choose... *love*.”

5. A Bitter Pill

Kitster burst through his bedroom like a maniac and Anakin turned to him, perplexed.

“Kitster, what the *kriff*...”

“Anakin... Ani... I’m... I’m sorry...”

“What’s wrong? Couldn’t you find a Pontifex? How is that so complicated?” Anakin teased buttoning the last button of his shirt. “I’m sure there is someone official in the Palace that can perform the ceremony. Except my mom, of course.” He chuckled, turning back to the mirror and fixing his collar.

“Ani, she’s *gone*.”

His friend frowned and turned back to him slowly. “Miraj? I know. I saw her ships disappear. What happened, anyway? Did my mom finally scared her away?” He quipped.

Kitster swallowed nervously. “She’s dead. And Padmé’s nowhere to be found. Plus, a ship left with an Imperial escort around it.”

“That’s not possible, Kit, we’re supposed to be married in thirty minutes,” Anakin said slowly, blinking as his brain didn’t register the entire information. He could care less about Miraj’s death, if anything, it was a blessing for the Galaxy. One less tyrant to create havoc. “You’re wrong. Lying. Or if this is a wedding prank, it’s an awful one.” He scowled.

“Anakin, I’m dead serious. There’s nothing left in her room, your father’s old ship is gone, and no one’s seen her.”

The Prince shook his head, a sense of dread filling him up. “She wouldn’t do that. Not to me. She was the one to suggest we got married,” Anakin insisted and then felt around the Palace for her Force presence. It always stood out and he knew from the previous night, it was because of her own midi-chlorian count. “No...” he shook his head, completely in denial. “She couldn’t do this... not without... speaking with me...” he racked his brain for something he had done wrong.

“Do you think it’s kidnapping, or something?”

“Kidnapping? Didn’t you say there was an Imperial Escort?”

“I mean... maybe your mom found out?” Kitster mumbled. “She did just kill Miraj Scintel, she might’ve decided to get Padmé out of here while she was at it.”

It dawned on Anakin and he brushed past his friend to rush down the hallway, towards the throne room. He didn’t bother knocking. He just opened the doors, startling his Mom’s advisors, but the Empress looked like he was *late*. “*What did you do?*” He demanded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, dear,” Shmi said, casually setting down her datapad. “I resolved the issue with Zygeria.”

Anakin's eyes flashes. Kitster that had followed him looked between mother and son and knew it was going to be ugly. He cleared his throat. "Gentleman, if you would follow me, please, the Prince needs a word with his Mother."

Warily, the Council members left one by one and Kitster closed the doors, hesitating just for a moment before shaking his head and leaving them alone.

"*Padmé*, Mom. What did you do to her? I know it had to be you!" Anakin was struggling to keep his voice in a reasonable volume.

"I didn't do anything to Lady Naberrie, Anakin, she chose to leave of her own free will. In quite a hurry too." Under his mother's calm exterior, there was rage and stress bubbling, he could sense it.

"She wouldn't have left like that. You did something. Said something. That calm façade is not fooling me. You know I can see deeper than that," Anakin hissed. "You found out we were going to elope this morning, didn't you? You scared her away. Force, Mom, did you hurt her?"

"I did nothing of the sort, she left of her own free will," Shmi said, clicking her tongue. "And I don't know *what* all this nonsense about eloping is. You're too young for such things. And I raised you better than that."

"Too young? I am about to become Emperor? Am I not too young for that either?" Anakin exploded. "I love her, Mom, she's the one I chose to stand by my side as I take the reins of the Empire, and the one I want as my Consort. *My* Empress."

"Anakin, it's a silly little crush, you'll be over her in a month."

"Then *you* don't know me. I have never been so taken with a woman like I am with Padmé. Mom, please, she's the one that I want and she wants me back. For *who* I am and not for *who* I will become." Anakin pleaded. "Don't you want me to be happy? To *find* love?"

"She left you for power," Shmi told him bluntly. "She used you."

"No," Anakin shook his head. "I don't believe you. I want to hear it from her lips. *She* has to tell me why she left and I *believe* she loves me and this was all because *you* somehow coerced her into leaving!"

"I forbid you to leave this planet, Anakin Skywalker," his mother warned. "Your time cannot be wasted on cheap whores like Padmé Naberrie."

Anakin's eyes narrowed and darkened with his mother's cruel words for the woman he loved. He was vibrating and didn't even realized. The Force sizzled around him and a few glass objects around the room cracked and shattered with the overwhelming pressure of the invisible force. "Do not speak about her like that," he said very calmly. "I am leaving to Naboo this afternoon and there is nothing you can do to stop me and if you try, Mom, I *will* accelerate my coronation and I *will* take matters into my own hands," he hissed.

"Anakin, *please*."

"No," he roared. "Try and stop me," Anakin turned on his left and left the throne room abruptly. Kitster was waiting outside and widened his eyes, swallowing as the look on his friend's face scared him. "Prepare my ship, Kitster, we're leaving as soon as possible."

"I've thought as much and I've gave Rex the green light to prepare your ship for departure." Kitster said. "We'll be ready to leave in one hour."

Padmé shifted through the stacks of flimsi and groaned yet again. She should have stayed. She should have gone straight back to Anakin and told him what was happening, she should have stood up to Shmi... She should have *called* Anakin.

But she hadn't done any of that. One threat, and she froze. Maybe that meant Shmi was right.

There was a knock on her office door and Teckla entered. "Padmé, you have a visitor," she announced quietly.

"Can you tell them to come back later?"

"It's Prince Anakin." Teckla licked her dry lips. "I don't think he's going to leave. He's looking for an explanation."

Padmé swallowed nervously and nodded. "Show him in."

Teckla nodded and left. In the foyer, she met up with Anakin and Kitster.

"Your Highness, she will receive you in her office. It's down the hallway, to the left." Teckla explained and exchanged a glance with Kitster.

"Thank you," Anakin said quietly, and followed her directions.

"I don't see this ending well," Teckla commented to Kitster.

"Your boss is about to break his heart, isn't it?" Kitster sighed and ran a hand through his hair, Teckla looked down at the floor and did not reply.

Anakin hesitated for a moment at the office's door. He knew that whatever happened, it was going to change him and it was frightening to think like that. He knocked and then entered, closing the door behind him and leaning against it. "I know brides are supposed to be late to tease the groom, but aren't you pushing it?" He raised his eyebrows, a nervous smile playing on his lips.

"No, I'm not," she said, looking down and tugging at the slit sleeves of her brown outer dress. "I'm not... Anakin, I can't. We can't do this."

He sighed, already expecting to hear something close to that. "If you are fearing my mother's wrath... there's nothing to fear. She has a couple of months left in the throne before I take over. Whatever she said, Padmé, you can disregard it," he explained and moved forward. "It's you that I want," he said, like it was the most basic thing in the Galaxy.

"And I want..." she swallowed. "I wanted you too. But there are more important things than us, I... I couldn't be selfish."

"What can be more important than the two of us? Padmé, we decided to get married on an impulse, yes, but it doesn't mean that it was wrong. If you want to wait and do things properly, I don't mind. I can ask your father for permission and we can have a decent

ceremony,” Anakin argued. “Padmé, you were ready to marry me. Your opinion couldn’t have changed like that.”

“Anakin, please, just go, before this is harder for either of us. You’ll be a wonderful Emperor, just... not with me. I can’t be what you need in an Empress.”

“What? Padmé, please, that’s ridiculous. I don’t know what my mother told you, but why can’t you understand that I make my own decisions?” Anakin insisted. “You are what *I* need. That alone is enough. You *were* with me, you *wanted* to marry me, you gave yourself to *me*. I think that’s proof enough that this is not something casual or that can be thrown away like this!”

“I love you, I just can’t marry you! I told you already, it’s not about us! It’s about me!”

While he was taken aback, he was not about to give up. “I have a right to know why!” He said, losing some of the gentleness from before.

She buried her face in her hands. “Your mother told me if I didn’t leave, she’d do everything to make sure that slavery continued to thrive. That the Zygerrian Ambassador would have her support. Or I could leave and be given full control of all their assets... I couldn’t... So many people, I couldn’t just let them suffer...”

“I would have never allowed her to do it! You should have come to me. You should have *fought* her! Or was power more enticing than a twenty year old with a silly crush?” He didn’t mean to be cruel, but the frustration was getting the better of him.

“It wasn’t about the power, it was about the people! It was about doing what was right, and if I had just wanted power, I would have stayed and—” She gasped, realizing how horrible that sounded. “Anakin...”

He froze, unable to believe her words as they registered. “Oh,” he muttered, his face becoming a cold, blank expression. “So... my mom was right? I was your way into power, wasn’t I?” Anakin began to retreat, feeling shame and anger curse through his body. “I *was* naive, I believed you really cared for who I was without a crown...” There was a bitterness filling him as he began to go through the moments they passed together and suddenly, they were all tainted and didn’t provide the joy they used to.

“No!” Padmé shot up from her seat, rushing to him. “I didn’t mean it like that! Please, just listen... Ani...”

“Tell me you don’t love me then,” he demanded, taking a step forward, closing the distance between them. “You don’t get to use my nickname if you don’t love me.”

“I do love you,” she whispered tearfully reaching up to bring his face to hers so that their lips crashed together.

Anakin kissed her back, hopelessly in love with her. “Then don’t leave me,” he whispered as they separated. “Don’t give up on me, because I can protect you. Whatever it is you fear, I will make sure I’ll protect you. I’ll do anything, Padmé, *anything* for you.”

“That’s why I have to stay away,” she sobbed, pressing her head to his chest. “I can’t... we can’t pretend the Galaxy doesn’t matter. And they need you more than me.”

"Nothing I say or do will make you change your mind, is it?" Anakin asked brokenly. "You really are choosing duty over me."

"Ani, I have to. I'm so sorry..."

Anakin nodded, slowly, and grasped her wrists pulling her away from him. "I am very sorry too," he said quietly and released her. "I'm sorry I trusted you. I'm sorry I thought I was worth any kind of sacrifice. I'm sorry you wasted your time with me and that I ever wore my heart on my sleeve for you."

"Anakin..."

"What can you possibly have to say right now?" He hissed.

"You weren't a waste of my time."

"But you might have been a waste of mine," he said bitterly and turned his back on her to exit the office and slamming the door behind him. Padmé crumpled to the floor in tears.

"Anakin?" Kitster asked, having stopped pacing in the hallway when he heard the door slam. His friend had a frightening blank look on his face and brushed past him and out of the house without a word. "Anakin!" Rushing after him. Anakin didn't slow down until they were at the ship.

"Sir?" Rex, Rakir's second in command, questioned but Anakin ignored him.

"We need to move out," Kitster said to the Captain with a small sigh. "Now." Rex hesitated and then nodded, entering the ship with Kitster and began ordering the small amount of troops that had accompanied Anakin.

"What happened?" Kitster asked, grabbing Anakin by the arm. "You're just... leaving her?"

"I want to get out of here and forget Padmé Naberrie existed," Anakin whispered and freed himself from his hold.

"What?"

"You heard me. If you respect me, Kit, you'll do as I say because I won't ever want to hear anything about her again in my life. I want to go back home and fulfill whatever destiny awaits me." The Prince said icily.

Kitster frowned, glancing back over his shoulder as they started their takeoff sequence. "Fine," he muttered reluctantly.

"Once we land you can inform my Mother I don't wish to see her, speak with her or listen to her. I'll be in my wing, undisturbed. Whatever I have scheduled for this week, reschedule. Tell Obi-Wan I don't wish to pursue his lessons for the foreseeable future. Mostly, I want to be left the *kriff* alone and I have a lightsaber I can use if someone disrespects my wishes." Anakin enumerated. "Got all of that?"

"Yes, your Highness."

Shmi watched Anakin's Star Destroyer enter Imperial airspace as she sipped at a glass of toniray with a smug little grin on her face. She might not have had the Force, but she could tell that Padmé Naberrie had not returned. The spineless little bitch was gone for good. If she'd been a younger woman, she might have sung out in joy.

"Threepio, tell Anakin I would like to see him when he returns."

"Master Kitster has already sent ahead a message, your majesty, Prince Anakin is requesting complete isolation for the time being."

"All the more reason he'll need his mother for comfort." And so she could say *I told you so*.

Threepio didn't look convinced. "Master Kitster was very explicit on the Prince's requests, your Majesty."

"I still outrank him as Regent, Threepio."

"I'll warn Master Kitster you'll be on your way, your majesty," Threepio said and wobbled off. "Oh dear, oh dear..." he trailed off. Shmi rolled her eyes, brushing past the protocol droid and heading to Anakin's wing.

When he saw the Empress approach, Kitster rushed to placate her. "I don't think that is a good idea. He's distraught. He should be alone."

"Oh, don't lecture me about my son, Kitster, it's none of your business."

"Actually it is, your majesty, and forgive me for being bold but Anakin is more than my friend. He's a brother and I know that this has had a deep effect on him," Kitster replied bluntly. "The first thing he asked me to do was to keep you out of his sight and I think you should respect him."

"Get out of my way, or Anakin will be the least of your worries."

"Certainly, your majesty, but do not say you weren't warned," Kitster replied and stepped aside. She deserved whatever Anakin was going to do or say.

Anakin had immediately retreated to his training rooms. He was too restless and he *needed* to blow off some steam. He was antsy to relieve some of the anger with the help of his lightsaber. He didn't know if he wanted to scream, cry or murder someone. Maybe all in one. As he activated the training droids, he stood in the middle of the room and ignited his lightsaber, taking a deep breath. He is not aware of how long he trained — fought — for. It could have been minutes or hours. When he finished, he was exhausted.

"Ani?" His mother walked in without even bothering to knock. "Oh, darling, I did try to warn you..."

"Don't *even* start!" Anakin whirled around, the adrenaline from the training still pumping through his veins. 'This is all your fault!' He shouted, dozens of training droids completely destroyed at his feet. "If you hadn't meddled, if you had just *left* us alone, she wouldn't have done this!"

Shmi took a step back. "Ani, this was for the best, better that the disappointment happen now rather than after you two had taken it too far."

“If you hadn’t emotionally blackmailed her, she would have stayed! With me! I love her, Mom and now she’s gone and it’s all because of you. *You* gave her the tools to break *my* heart. To break *me*.” The glowing light of the saber cast a haunting shadow over his features and Shmi fleetingly thought there was a yellow shadow over his usually beautiful, blue eyes.

“Ani...”

“I don’t want you here. I don’t need you. Why can’t you respect what I want for *once* in my life?” He didn’t give her time to speak. “*Leave* and go ruin someone else’s life!”

“Anakin, you’re hurting now, but you’ll see—”

“***Leave*** !” He shouted again, anguished. This time, his mother listened. Anakin fell to the ground, exhaustion and pain taking over him as he turned off his lightsaber and hide his face into his hands. He grabbed fistfuls of his hair and screamed. Screamed in agony, in frustration, in loss... The sound seemed to echo through the entire palace and shake its very foundation.

6. Bad Choices

“Are you alright? You’re quieter than usual.”

It had been six months since Padmé had left him. Unbelievable as it was, after all as he was tired of hearing they were just “together” for one month, it had taken an inhuman amount of strength to move forward. Anakin knew he was unable to love so much, so strongly again, so he was aware that a marriage of convenience was his destiny. The destiny that he never wanted. Duchess Satine Kryze had been his Mother’s Council first choice and Anakin had accepted for one reason. Obi-Wan. Satine and his mentor were an item, and Anakin wanted to help them. By being his promised bride, no one would check twice why she would be at the Palace... often at the exact same times as the Jedi Knight.

The Prince didn’t know how the Jedi did it. Refuse love so openly. Even with the ‘heartache’ it brought him, Anakin wouldn’t change what he had. He knew Obi-Wan was conflicted about breaking the code, but honestly, Anakin would have done the exact same thing.

“You should elope.” He said calmly. “You and Satine. I think it’s time. The Council wants to make it truly official, with an engagement banquet and wedding date and I think you should choose love for once, Obi-Wan.”

“You know it’s forbidden for a Jedi,” his teacher reminded him. “Assume meditation position. We have much to do.”

“Obi-Wan, I don’t want to train and I think you’re being foolish. Do you love Satine? If you do, then this is the wrong way to go about things. This will slowly destroy you both.”

“Satine and I have both accepted that our duties must come first. The Jedi Order is still recovering from the Purges your father called for. Master Yoda would never release me. And I gave Qui-Gon my word that I would train you.”

“Screw duty, Obi-Wan, and stop using me as an excuse!” Anakin scowled. ‘The Jedi Order will keep recovering. My training is basically complete. You’re just afraid I’ll fall to the Dark Side because of a little heartbreak. It won’t happen. You taught me well.’ Anakin approached his friend and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Trust me, more than anyone, when I say that no duty is worth the sacrifice. Choose each other. Choose a life together. Be happy. Have a few kids. Train them. The decision is simple and the consequences pale in comparison to the lifetime of happiness you will have.”

Obi-Wan sighed, sitting down with his legs folded. “If you want to talk about this, Anakin, you have to meditate with me. That’s the deal.”

“Meditation makes me think, Obi-Wan and I hurt when I think too much,” Anakin huffed. ‘But just to prove my friendship and honesty to you, I’ll do it,’ he said and imitated his mentor’s position. “I’ll help you in any way I can. The both of you. Run away. Be happy. Someone should be with the person they love, not all of us have the same options.”

“You know what I want to say,” the Jedi pointed out. “You need to let go. These thoughts only have power over you as long as you allow them to.”

“Could you let go of Satine?” Anakin asked quietly. “While I have accepted what has happened to me, as best as I can, I know I will only completely let it go with time. But this is not about me right now, Obi-Wan, is how ridiculous you are being. Have you asked Satine? Asked her to run away together. Elope.”

“Anakin, I thought about it every day Qui-Gon and I were protecting her. If she had said the word, I would have left the Order in a heartbeat. If I couldn’t do it then, how could I possibly do it now?”

“Because you have to think why she didn’t ask you. Maybe she wanted to. Maybe she did not have the courage to ask you to give up your Master, your promising career path as a Jedi.” He may have had a serious talk with Satine the previous night. “Why don’t you ask her?”

“Anakin, please...”

“Obi-Wan, I am going to respect your training to the letter. I am even going to meditate today, without much complaining. I will follow your advice to let go and move on if... and only if... you talk to Satine about this.”

The Jedi shook his head, but he was smiling ever so slightly. “That is a low, manipulative blow, my young student.”

“It’s not manipulation, Master Kenobi, it’s simply a way of negotiation. *You* have taught me that as well,” Anakin pointed out with a small smile. “Do we have a deal?”

“Let me meditate on it.”

“I will want an answer by the end of our training session then.”

“So, they’re doing it tonight? That’s hilarious, the HoloNet is going to have a field day with it! Oh, Force, pour me another!” Princess Amee of Aquilae laughed as she tucked her hair behind her ears and batted her eyelashes at Anakin. “The Duchess and the Jedi, it’s the ultimate forbidden love.”

Anakin shook his head, laughing, as he finished his third drink of the night. “I just hope they are happy. And I am glad Obi-Wan listened to reason. If he didn’t, I might have ended up marrying her,” he made a face. “That would be awkward.”

“Are you going to play heartbroken for the media?” Amee asked, tilting her head curiously.

“Not really,” Anakin said slowly. ‘Basically everyone suspected this was more political than anything. I will just issue a statement saying that I am sorry that it didn’t work out and I wish her and my mentor all the best. No hard feelings.’ He shrugged. “My image will make a swift recovery once I announce my true Consort in a few months.”

“Lucky girl. Do I know her?”

He picked his refilled glass and turned to her, a smile on his lips. "I'll let you know." Anakin winked and downed the shot. "Say, Amee, how would you like to become the Emperor's Consort?" The way he made the question, it just showed how tipsy he was already. But it did not make his voice slur or break off. He sounded awfully confident.

Amee spit out her drink, coughing violently. "You're joking, and it's not funny," she gasped, struggling to cough out the last of the toniray.

"I'm not joking." Anakin pointed out. "We are kind of cute together, aren't we?" He smirked. "Besides, we're friends and that right there is very important."

"Anakin..."

"Amee..." he stood from his stool and made her abandon hers as well as he tugged her to stand in front of him. "We are the best possible match. We care for each other. We know each other. We have a solid relationship, based on mutual trust and what else can we ask? We both know that in the position that we are in, we rarely find ourselves in a relationship we can both appreciate."

"Anakin, we're both drunk, this is crazy." But as she said it, she was leaning in closer, her eyes were starting to close. "Maybe... ask me in the morning?" Her lips tugged into a sly smile.

"*In vino veritas*," Anakin smirked and raised her chin to meet her eyes. "Isn't that true?"

"I just don't want to be a conquest if you change your mind once the wine wears off."

"You're not a conquest, I would never treat you like that." He replied softly and cradled her face in his hands. "You're my future Consort."

"Can you let me ask me when *I'm* not drunk?" she whispers. "Because this is everything I've ever wanted, and I want to be able to remember it."

Anakin nodded and kissed her forehead. "Have *brunch* with me tomorrow? Because with the amount of alcohol we had, I doubt any of us will be up for breakfast in time."

"Deal." She nodded, a pink flush spreading over her cheeks. "Just one thing first." And with that, she grabbed his collar and tugged him down so she could kiss him. It was a little too quick, their teeth scraped against each other, and the rhythm of their lips was off, but it wasn't *terrible*.

But it also wasn't Padmé. A cold chill went down his spine just at the fleeting thought of *that* first kiss and it influenced his attitude, which made Amee pull back. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, I'm... way drunker than what I believed," he lied as he faked a smile. "I will take that as a yes, but we can make it official at brunch."

"Okay." Amee's brows furrowed for a moment, but she nodded. "I should get back to the Embassy before my jailers—I mean, *chaperones* realize I'm gone."

"Your *jailers* will be gone soon," he smirked. "After we announce our Courtship, you'll have your wing at the Palace. No more jailers or Embassy. Just a Princess getting prepared to become the Empress Consort."

“Wow,” she whispered, taking a step away and tripping over her dress. “Oops... Sorry. I’m going now. I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“I’ll ask Cody to take you back to the Embassy. To make sure you arrive safely.” He chuckled, shaking his head as he supported her before she fell to the floor.

“Thanks.” She smiled at him sheepishly. “I won’t do it again.”

“You’re going to belong to the Royal Family. You’re living with my Mom. We’re both going to get drunk again, believe me,” he snorted before signaling for Cody to approach them. “Commander, take her highness to the Embassy, please and stay there. You’re in charge of her safety for the foreseeable future.”

“Yes, sir,” Cody said, albeit a bit confused.

“Bye, Anakin!” Amee waved to him as the clone commander escorted her out, leaving Anakin alone.

He sat at the bar again and asked for another drink. Amee was his only shot at a bearable marriage and he had to follow it through. They were friends. Great friends. He cared for Amee, deeply, they have known each other for years and he loved her as a friend. He was sure that with time he would learn to love her in another way, a more romantic one. This was him following his part of the deal with Obi-Wan.

Letting the past go. Moving forward.

Amee was his future while Padmé Naberrie would remain in his past. Forever.

Padmé woke to the sound of someone banging on her door. Considering that she was currently on an Imperial Star Destroyer in Zygerrian airspace, that meant the situation had to be dire. She shot up, hastily grabbing her robe before she answered the door to find Teckla standing there with a very winded-looking Kitster Banai. “I must still be dreaming,” she mumbled, rubbing at her eyes.

“No, no, I’m here, and you’re going to want to hear what I have to say, Padmé. You’ve got to come back to Imperial Center.”

“Is he drunk?” Padmé whispered to Teckla.

“No, you’re going to want to hear what he has to say,” Teckla said, widening her eyes. “It’s... big.”

Padmé hesitated, biting her lip as she considered it, then groaned and nodded. “Come in then.”

“Thank you, we’ll help you pack,” Kitster quipped as he entered the room followed by Teckla. “Anakin and Satine’s *‘betrotal’* is over. It’s the best time for you to return and get back together with Ani.”

“Slow down,” Padmé commanded, using the tone of a queen. “You seem to be forgetting that Anakin made it very clear he wants nothing more to do with me. And that I couldn’t even stand up to his mother when I should have. I didn’t— I *don’t* deserve him.”

"Anakin was hurt, but I'm sure if you both sit down and talk as rational adults, you'll work it out. He's not on speaking terms with Shmi and I have a feeling she knows she screwed up! You love him, don't you?"

"Enough that I know the best thing for him is for me to stay away."

"Force blast it, woman, are you giving up again?" Kitster threw his arms in the air, frustrated. "I've been fighting for you. Anakin was *this* close to throwing me out of the Palace."

"I can't give up again. That would imply I had any kind of hope," Padmé retorted, taking a stack of reports from her table and shuffling through them. "This is the most I'm good for."

"He's still funding us," Teckla spoke up. "All those resources you two agreed on before you got involved, we're still getting them. Don't you think that means he cares?"

"It means he's a man of his word."

"I thought you would jump at the opportunity of getting him back. He still loves you and this breakup was brutal on him. He's not the same. He needs you. Don't you need him?" Kitster said, frustration beginning to leak to his voice. "Isn't he worth fighting for?"

"Yes, and when I needed to, I couldn't!" Padmé shouted.

"You can do it *now* before you *lose* him for good," Kitster shouted back.

"Oh, and how is that supposed to go? Do I walk up to him and say, 'darling, I'm sorry, but I couldn't marry you because I didn't trust your mother not to poison me at our wedding feast?!?'"

"Yes!" Kitster hissed. "Padmé, I know you love him. He loves you. Anakin has not been the same. He worries me. I never know what his next step is going to be now and since I'm basically lobbying for you, he has cut me out of many important decisions, so I'm sticking out my neck here for you, don't let it be in vain."

"Lord Banai, I think you need to go," Padmé said, her face betraying no emotion even as her mind swirled in confusion. "You're free to spend whatever time you want with my assistant, but this is personal."

"Ugh, maybe Shmi was right after all, with scaring you away from Imperial Center," Kitster huffed.

"Kitster, you don't mean that," Teckla scolded. "Leave her alone, you just gave her a lot of information all at once."

"Maybe they're really hopeless after all, Teckla," Kitster told his girlfriend. "I'm going back home and kind of beg for Anakin's forgiveness before Rex takes over the best friend position." He turned on his heel and left both women alone to their thoughts.

Shmi was sitting in her husband's old study. While she'd made sure most of the rooms Sheev had used were destroyed, she'd maintained one small corner of the palace as he'd liked

it. Mostly for times when she needed to stew in self-loathing, and this was certainly one of those times.

She hadn't been fond of Padmé Naberrie, but Satine Kryze was a far worse breed of sanctimonious brat.

There was a knock on the study's door, retrieving Shmi from her dark thoughts. "Mom, it's me."

"Ani." She shot out of her chair, beating Threepio to open the door. "Where were you all night? I was worried sick!"

"Well, don't worry too much. We don't want you to go around making ultimatums, right?" Anakin quipped as he entered his dead father's study. He scowled. He hated the dark energy of the room. "I just wanted to give you a heads up about an announcement that will be made in the morning on my behalf."

Shmi took a step back. "Ani, what have you done?"

"Tomorrow morning, the Galaxy will be informed of my official Courting of the Princess of Aquilae. It's just a formality, really, before we announce our engagement." Anakin explained.

Aquilae... An image came to mind of a skinny, gap-toothed girl in an overly elaborate dress telling Shmi that one day, she was going to marry Anakin. Little Princess Amee. "Are you so certain she'll be a suitable Empress?" she asked carefully.

"Amee will be a wonderful Consort, Mom, and I won't hear *one* complaint from you. You are forbidden to be in the same room as Amee, alone. Do you hear me?" Anakin said, face hardening.

"Consort," Shmi repeated. "So you don't hold her in *that* high a regard."

Anakin narrowed his eyes. "Mom, I'm not tolerating this behavior again. My coronation will happen the *following* day of my wedding and you'll officially be no one of power to the Galaxy."

"You were going to make Padmé Naberrie your Empress. Your partner in full. Why does Princess Amee not get the same consideration?"

"I don't owe you any explanations. This was just a simple exchange of information, and just because you are my mother and I still have a small amount of respect for you." Anakin scowled, refusing to answer to Shmi's provocation.

"Forget Mas Amedda's insistence, Anakin, you don't *need* a consort or an Empress," Shmi informed him bluntly. "Your father certainly didn't."

"I will need an heir," Anakin retorted. "And I want my heir to have a family. A father and a mother who love and respect each other. Amee is my friend. I care for her and she loves me. She'll be a perfect Consort and an even better wife and mother. You should get used to the idea that Amee will be a part of this family."

"Anakin..."

“What is it?”

“Someday, you’ll understand.”

Anakin didn’t reply and simply ducked out of the study. It was a place that reeked of the Dark Side and he had promised Obi-Wan he would stay on track. He had insisted Shmi tear down the place as well, it would affect her eventually. Anakin was sure it already had. He couldn’t remember ever fighting with his Mom. She has always been his protector, confident and best friend and suddenly... it was another woman ruling him as property and not as a son. Until she returned to who she was, Anakin was not sure he would ever have a good relationship with her again.

“Padmé, wait—”

“You go ahead to the hotel, I’ll catch up,” Padmé said, hurrying past Teckla toward the rental speeders. “Right now, I need to be somewhere.”

“Of course.” Teckla smiled warmly. “Go to him.” Padmé blushed before going to haggle with the rental droid. Twenty minutes later, she was speeding through the city’s endless air traffic. *I’m coming, Anakin.*

The palace grew closer and closer, and her heart was pounding, but Padmé knew she couldn’t turn back. She wasn’t losing him again—

“*Breaking news!*” One of the countless holoscreens that decorated the city blared to life, causing the speeders to slow down. Padmé hissed in frustration, trying to find an opening, to ignore the broadcast— “*It appears two secret romances have been brewing here on Imperial Center. Hours after the surprise elopement of Duchess Satine Kryze and Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Imperial Crown Prince declared his intentions to Princess Aamee of Aquilae...*”

Padmé heard nothing after that. Her hands fell away from the speeder controls and the vessel started to plummet downward as violently as her heart was shattering. It couldn’t be... He wouldn’t... “*The statement from the Palace confirmed that the young couple intends to celebrate their union still this Galactic year, immediately followed by the Prince’s coronation. What a joyous day for our Galaxy!*”

Her speeder crashed against another one and the other driver was caught completely off guard. Senator Palo Jemabie winced at the crash and rubbed the back of his head. His mouth opened in shock as he recognized Padmé.

The rental speeder finally hit the ground, throwing Padmé over the front. Miraculously, nothing broke, but her head was throbbing, not just from the crash but from the realization that Anakin was not, as Kitster had insisted, still in love with her. She lay on the street, crying as a few pedestrians passed her by and the speeder she’d knocked into parked alongside hers, the driver getting out and hurrying to her.

“By the stars, Padmé, are you alright?” Palo Jemabie rushed to his old acquaintance’s side, worried. ‘Of course you’re not,’ he scoffed at himself. “Come on, I need to take you to a medical center so they can give you a check-up. You can have something broken or a concussion!”

“Palo,” she stammered as she recognized him. “I’m fine. You don’t need to go through all that trouble. I just... had some engine failure. Rental speeders, you know?”

“Yes, they are complete junk, you should be more careful when you rent a speeder. A lot of serious accidents happen due to them, as you yourself experienced right now,” Palo quickly helped her up. “I won’t be at rest if I don’t take you to a medical droid, at least for a quick exam. It was a nasty crash and the way it threw you out... it just worries me. Will you please let me take you, Padmé? For old time’s sake.”

Padmé hesitated, staring up at the giant screen flashing images of Anakin with his new princess. Clearly, he’d moved on. Maybe running into Palo was the Force’s way of telling her she needed to do the same. “Alright,” she nodded, leaning against him. “Dinner tonight?”

“If the emdee clears you, sure, I would love to.” He chuckled and wrapped one arm around her. “It will be good to catch up with you, Padmé. Ever since you left in your Crusade to save the galaxy, I never heard anything else about you.”

“I’ve been busy,” she mumbled as they got into his speeder. “And so have you, *Senator*.”

“I am only the Senator of Naboo because you declined the position.” Palo smiled, helping her inside with care. “Are you sure nothing hurts?” He frowned slightly.

Only my soul. “Just a little bruised.”

Palo nodded, still unsure, and returned to his driving seat. The speeder hadn’t suffered too much damage, but Padmé’s was... well... scrap. “Then let’s take you to the medical center. Then, dinner. I’m taking you to my favorite place. The view of Imperial Center is amazing,” he smiled warmly at her.

“That’s very kind of you,” she mumbled. “It doesn’t overlook the Palace, does it?”

“It does. It’s front and center. The jewel of Imperial Center.” Palo replied, not understanding Padmé’s tone. “Have you heard the news? Prince Anakin is going to get married before the Galactic year is over. He’s going to take charge when the one rises and I can’t wait to see how he performs.”

“Could we go somewhere else? A little more... private?” Padmé asked, not acknowledging what he’d said about Anakin. “I’ve seen more than enough of the palace, I was there for the siege. I’d... rather not remember it.” *Given that I lost my virginity to the love of my life and then lost the love of my life to my own cowardice.*

“I heard about it. Yes, I know somewhere else, it’s no problem. I’m really glad you crashed into my speeder, Padmé,” he grinned at her.

Padmé hesitated, then managed to smile. “I guess I am too.”

“ARE YOU CRAZY?!?” Kitster demanded, storming into Anakin’s workroom. “You’re just... how could you?! What about Padmé?”

“What have I told you about storming into my rooms?” Anakin hissed, having dropped a screwdriver and bending down to pick it up. “No, no... what have I told you about

mentioning her name?”

“She was coming back!” Kitster said, completely ignoring Anakin. “I went all the way out to Zygerria to tell her you and Satine were a sham, and she was coming back, and you... you blew it, you nerfherder!”

“Coming back?” Anakin laughed. “Kitster, I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s no one here. It has been seven months, can you let it go? I did. That is why I’m with Amee. I thought you liked Amee. We were all friends, weren’t we?” He shook his head. “If you want to keep being a part of my life, you have to accept things how they are right now.”

“Maybe if your engagement to Amee hadn’t been broadcast on *every* channel and screen in the galaxy, you’d... ugh!” Kitster threw up his hands, scowling. “Fine. Whatever. Idiot. I’m done trying to help.”

“You should have been done the moment she left me. If you’re my friend, Kit, you’ll support me. Amee makes me happy and she is going to be my Consort.”

“But you don’t love her!”

“I love her,” Anakin stated. “Eventually, I will be *in* love with her the way she deserves me to be. Now you either accept this or you know where the door is.”

“I’ll accept that you’re a blind idiot,” Kitster said. “And that you’re deluding yourself.”

“I am going to be your Emperor and I won’t accept you calling me an idiot any longer, Kitster,” Anakin growled. “I have nothing else to say in regards to Padmé Naberrie.”

“You love her, and she loves you, and you’re both—”

“*Enough!*” Anakin screamed. Several droid parts flew through the air, one of them nearly hitting Kitster in the eye. “I won’t have it. Don’t push me, Kister, don’t make me do something I regret. If you don’t stop this nonsense right now, I will need to do some drastic measures.”

There was the echo of heels on the marble hallways leading to the Prince’s workroom, and a frazzled Amee showed up in the doorway. “Kitster, Ani... what... what happened?”

“Nothing,” Kitster said hollowly. “Nothing at all, Princess. I need to go speak with my father about some upcoming military exercises. Goodbye.” He brushed past Amee without another word. Amee frowned, looking at Anakin.

“What bantha left its poodoo in his breakfast?”

Anakin approached her with a blank expression and wrapped his arms around her waist. “He and I are disagreeing on something and I don’t think we’ll see eye to eye for a while,” he smiled down at her. “Talking about happier things, our announcement is being a success,” he grinned and tucked one strand of her hair behind her ear. “How are you feeling?”

“Embarrassed. I’ve been fielding comms from my family all day to tell them I’m not pregnant,” Amee giggled. “Not that I don’t want kids with you, obviously.”

“Hmmm. Soon, I promise,” he chuckled. “Kids will definitely be in our future. Has my mother said anything to you?”

"I mean, she gave me this look that makes me think I should be careful what I eat, just in case she poisons me. Does she do that to all your girlfriends?"

Anakin hesitated. "Trust me, you're getting the lucky treatment."

"Oh, good." Amee stood on her tiptoes to peck him on the lips. "Because I invited her to dinner with us tonight. I wanted to pick the brain of the expert on being Empress, just so I can be prepared when it's my turn."

"I... what did she say?" Anakin almost cringed.

"Not much. Just looked at me funny, then said she didn't know much about being a consort. Which I don't get at all, but I get it. She's still warming up to the idea of me."

Anakin bit his lower lip. "Empress and Consort to the Emperor are... different roles," he began explaining. "But it won't change the responsibilities you'll have and I'll support you every step of the way. You can't take my mother's actions too personally. She can be difficult. Very difficult. It shouldn't influence our decisions, though."

"Right." Amee kissed him again. "So, I'll let you get back to your droids, and see you at dinner?"

"Dinner." He nodded and kissed her back.

"Love you." And with that, she left before Anakin had to face the pressure of saying it back.

7. Worst Party Ever

Padmé had barely gotten into her hotel suite when she heard the knock at the door. “Are you my boyfriend or my stalker?” she asked teasingly as she opened it to let Palo into the room. “I’m not even unpacked!”

“I have missed you, you can’t judge me for being eager,” Palo replied with a grin as he came up to her and capture her lips in a passionate kiss. “You seem to be running from Imperial Center at all given opportunities, so I use my time with you wisely.”

“You know I’m busy. And you’re supposed to be too,” Padmé said as she pulled away from the kiss. “Or are you no longer a Senator?”

“Yes, I am, which reminds me we have a date tomorrow night you can’t escape.”

“We do?” she asked, blinking slowly as she tried to remember. “And what might that be?”

“The Prince’s engagement party,” Palo announced. The blood drained from Padmé’s face and she fought the urge to vomit. Or maybe she *should* vomit and tell him she couldn’t go. She didn’t want to be in the same room as Anakin a year after she had met him while he celebrated his engagement to another woman.

“Oh. That,” she finally managed to say. “Is that tomorrow?”

“It is. It’s a bit odd it took them so long to celebrate an engagement everyone knew it was going to happen. Soon we’ll be attending their wedding. It’s going to be the wedding of the Galactic century, apparently,” Palo said.

“Wonderful.”

“What is it?” Her boyfriend asked.

“Nothing, I’m just tired,” Padmé lied. “And now I have to make sure I have a dress that’s appropriate for the occasion.”

“I know it’s going to be hard but try not to outshine the bride?” Palo joked. “We don’t want the Prince to come to us and demand explanations.”

“Maybe we should leave early so that it never comes to that,” Padmé said, only half-joking.

“I know Court is not your favorite thing, Padmé, but it will be good for us. My colleagues think you’re a myth, I haven’t been able to properly introduce you. Just a few hours to mingle, pay our respects to the young couple and then we’ll leave.”

“Great.” Padmé sighed, finally pulling off her cloak. “Well, for now, why don’t you let me change and then you can take me out to see the *Menace of the Opera*? It’s supposed to be very romantic.”

“Gladly, my dear. You know, I still can’t believe how lucky I was for your speeder to have crashed into mine,” he kissed her again, and Padmé managed to smile.

"I was lucky too."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes, Empress, I saw them together in Senator Jemabie's box."

"Thank you, you've been very helpful." Shmi passed the credits into the theatre concierge's outstretched hand. "I'm sure you'll keep this between us?"

"Of course, Empress."

"You can go now. Threepio, get Kitster Banai. I want to talk to him."

"Shall I get Master Anakin too, Mistress Shmi?"

"No, that won't be necessary." Shmi turned her chair to face the night sky as she waited. So, Padmé Naberrie really was dating her senator. That meant she would be at the ball tomorrow night... this night, really, it was past midnight now.

"Empress? You sent for me?" Kitster entered the room, unsure of the reason he had been summoned so late.

"Padmé Naberrie is going to be making a reappearance in Imperial society at our upcoming ball, Kitster."

"Anakin's engagement party?" Kitster guessed. "Tell me she's showing up to stop it from happening."

"No, she'll be coming as Senator Jemabie's date."

"Padmé is dating Palo? Oh, Force, she's moved on as well?" Kitster dropped his shoulders. "They're hopeless, aren't they?"

"I won't mince words, I know I made a mistake in pushing away her as I did," Shmi admitted softly. "But I intend to make it right."

Kitster nodded. "How can I help? Because Anakin has pushed me away and I have to do something before he and Amee tie the knot for good."

"If Anakin isn't listening to you, perhaps the best thing to be done is to make Amee aware of the truth," Shmi pointed out. "She's proud, she won't stand for him lying to her."

"I know I want Anakin to marry the woman he truly loves, but isn't that a bit too cruel on Amee? She's naive, she doesn't deserve to be hurt." Kitster pointed out softly.

"Would it not be crueler for her to realize five years down the line, when she and Anakin are married and have children?"

"Yes, but Anakin should be the one telling her the truth."

"Do you think he will?"

Kitster remained quiet. "He thinks he can fall in love with her. Maybe after the first child is born. I know it won't be enough. He doesn't. He's convinced on moving on, for good."

“Seeing Padmé might break that conviction.”

He made a face. “Yeah, I don’t think he’ll have a very good reaction to her. He always speaks of her with such anger, I’m afraid he’ll lose it at the party.”

“That would be an even worse way for Amee to find out.”

“What is your plan, your majesty, and how can I help my friend not make the biggest mistake of his life?”

“Are you still seeing Miss Naberrie’s assistant?”

“In a way, I am. I wasn’t aware of Padmé and Palo’s relationship, though.”

“I don’t think she wanted anyone to know, considering how I only had it confirmed tonight. Which leads me to believe she is *not* happy with the relationship.” Shmi tapped her fingers together. “Finding a way to bring the two unknowingly unhappy couples is the first step.”

“Well, I’m sure Palo is not aware of Padmé’s previous relationship with Ani. Won’t the same theory work with him as it does to Amee?”

“Hopefully. But he’s in the Senate, so he might be a little slower about recognizing the signs.”

“I think the first step is to let Anakin and Padmé encounter and see how it goes. Then we need to make Amee and Palo aware of their respective pair’s true feelings. I’ll see if Teckla can help me with Palo Jemabie.” Kitster paced as he thought of a strategy.

“Good. Good.” Shmi nodded. “We only have six months at best. Tonight might well be our only chance.”

“I’ll make sure Padmé and Anakin meet in a balcony, away from prying eyes,” Kitster said. “Empress?”

“Yes, Kitster?”

“What you did to Padmé and Anakin, was terrible and unforgiving. I don’t think Anakin has forgiven you or that he’ll ever come to that point. But the fact that you want to amend your mistakes is a very good sign but maybe... maybe act carefully? Anakin might not take it very well when he finds out you are meddling.”

“If you don’t tell him, how is he to know?” Shmi asked pointedly.

“I am not going to tell him but when something happens in his love life that is unexpected, he only has one guilty party to look at and that will be you.”

“If it means he has the partner he deserves, Kitster, I am willing to make that sacrifice.”

“You can count on me, Empress,” Kitster nodded with a smile before turning on his back and leaving the room.

Padmé, you don’t have to grip my arm *that* tightly, everyone’s going to love you.”

“Sorry,” Padmé relaxed her hand a little and smoothed down the shimmering green fabric of her gown. ‘I’m just... nervous.’ She was going back into the palace, back to the place where everything had gone horribly wrong, she was going to have to look Anakin in the eye and wish him well. “Are you sure we can’t leave sooner?”

“Not before we give our good wishes to the royal couple. You’ve met the Prince before, during the siege, wasn’t he pleasant to you?” Palo asked as he gave polite nods to some familiar faces.

“You might say that,” Padmé mumbled. *More than pleasant. We took each other’s virginities and were planning to elope.* “It was a complicated time.”

“I’ve met the Prince in a few occasions and he is very nice. The past year he has been... different, but with his engagement to Princess Amee, I think he’s back on track,” Palo squeezed her hand. “Relax, Padmé, they are going to be happy to see you again.”

“Forget about that, let’s dance,” Padmé said, biting down on her lip. “This is a party, right?”

“Yes, right,” Palo laughed and guided her to the dance floor. “My lady,” he said teasingly, as he bowed to her.

“Oh, stop it.” Padmé rolled her eyes as she placed a hand on his shoulder and started moving in time with the music. Across the room, Amee kissed Anakin on the cheek as they moved down the receiving line.

“Do you know who that is with Senator Jemabie? I don’t recognize her,” she whispered.

Anakin shrugged at his fiancée before turning his head to the dance floor, searching for the Senator of Naboo. When he found him and his eyes fell on the woman that he was dancing with, he lost the smile on his face and went cold. His heart began beating faster and harder against his ribcage. He licked his dry lips as he processed the image in front of his eyes. Looking down, he nodded at Amee.

“Yes, that... that is Padmé Naberrie. I was not aware she and the Senator were in a relationship,” he said, his tone detached as his eyes suddenly went very cold and he stiffened, his body and mind now hypersensitive to Padmé’s nearby presence.

“I heard he had a secret girlfriend, no one’s seen her these past months,” Amee gossiped. “They look cute together.”

“The cutest,” Anakin muttered grabbing a nearby flute of champagne and sipping on it. “I wish them all the happiness in the Galaxy.” He muttered between his teeth and took a longer sip.

“Ani...” Amee frowned for a moment, then smiled again. “Come on, it’s a party for us. For our love. Dance with me?”

He looked down at her clear brown eyes and caved, giving her a small smile and setting the flute down. “Of course, sweetheart,” he kissed her forehead and squeezed her hand as she lead him to the dance floor. And then, just for the briefest moment, Padmé whirled past him and her brown eyes met his blue ones.

The familiar electrical current went down his nervous system and it was the best thing he had felt since she left. It was powerful, it was meaningful and it made him relieve every single one of their moments together, up until the part where she broke his heart and left him hollow. He shook his head, momentarily lightheaded and his movements came to a halt.

“Ani?” Amee frowned. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I need some fresh air, Amee, can you forgive me?” Anakin sighed, Padmé’s presence turning his world upside down again. He needed a moment to regain his posture. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Okay...” Amee frowned a little but let go of his hands, allowing him to step away. Anakin gave her one last comforting smile, before disappearing into the empty balcony. He took several deep breaths and began to pace, racking his brain for a good reason for Padmé to be at his *engagement* party.

From the dais where she’d been watching, Shmi descended the steps to Amee’s side, patting her shoulder in a gesture that could almost pass for maternal. “Don’t worry about it, dear, it’s always hard to see old loves.”

Amee turned to Shmi, shock coloring her features. “Old loves? Besides Satine, Anakin was never in another courtship. And Satine was a facade. Anakin was just lightheaded.”

“He didn’t tell you?” Shmi asked, feigning concern. “Anakin and Padmé had plans to elope, right around the time the siege ended.”

The young Princess slowly turned her head to watch the older brunette. “Padmé Naberrrie?” Dread began filling her insides. “She and Anakin were... eloping? No, he never mentioned it. What happened between them?”

“Duty got in the way of love. It’s a tragedy, really,” Shmi said, omitting her part in it, lest Amee figure out what she was doing. “She ran off to save the Zygerrians after Miraj Scintel’s unfortunate demise, without so much as a word to Anakin.”

“You’re telling me she broke his heart, then,” Amee shook her head, looking down at her engagement ring. “I knew something had happened to him. He was different from before, but I just thought it had to do with the pressure of becoming Emperor. How much would you say they loved each other, your majesty?”

“They were together constantly, she was responsible for him taking more initiative in the process of ruling. I suspect guilt for what she did has been the reason for her absence, the fact that she surrendered to the martyr’s instinct that the Naboo put in all their Queens. I kept Anakin sheltered from that hard truth, that sometimes, being a true ruler means putting the needs of others before yourself. But your parents didn’t neglect that lesson, did they, my dear?”

“No, they have not, your majesty,” Amee raised her chin defiantly. “The siege happened over a year ago and whatever was between Anakin and Padmé Naberrrie is in the past. I’m the one engaged to your son. I’m the one at his side, in this party. Padmé is accompanied by Palo Jemabie and from what I can see, both of them have moved on. That is what growing up does. I hope your parents didn’t neglect *that* lesson, your majesty,” she said with a sweet smile. “If you excuse me, I need to attend to my guests.”

Shmi gritted her teeth before turning it into a smile. Amee had no idea what moving on looked like. She could see Kitster whispering to Teckla Minnau, who was now separating her boss from Jemabie and sending her the same way Anakin had gone. Perfect.

Padmé nearly tripped over her skirts as Teckla guided her along with more force than was necessary, and then suddenly, her assistant was gone, and she was standing on a balcony, staring at Anakin, who had his back to her. She tried to back away, but the doors were shut and her body slammed into them more loudly than she'd expected.

Anakin turned around, surprised at the sound, and narrowed his eyes at her. "I was just going," she mumbled, fumbling for a handle. "I'm sorry..."

"What are you doing at my engagement party?" He said, his voice like a clap of thunder ripping the skies.

"Palo wanted me to come," she whispered, avoiding his gaze. "I tried to tell him no, but I couldn't... I didn't want to tell him about..."

"You do excel at being manipulated, don't you? It's by my mother, by *Palo*... honestly, do you have a single bone in your body that takes control every once in a while?" Anakin spat.

"Yes, and right now, I'm trying very hard to suppress its urge to slap you," Padmé said bitterly.

"Because I'm the one who's in the wrong here, clearly," Anakin provoked. "What part of this celebration did you think it would be good for you to be in?"

"I don't see why you would care, seeing as you've so clearly moved on!" she snapped defensively.

"It doesn't mean I wanted to see *you* again or be in the same room as you are. This is *my* Palace. *My* engagement party. You have no right, no reason, no moral to be standing here, flaunting yourself and your new boyfriend in my face!" He bellowed.

"*Flaunting myself?* Palo and I started dating because he was the one who took me to the medcenter after I crashed my speeder hearing about your engagement when I was back here to tell you I was sorry, and I made a mistake and I love you!" The present tense slipped out without her even realizing it.

"Because saying sorry could fix everything for you, wouldn't it? Saying sorry would be enough to heal the betrayal and the heartache." Anakin hissed, too blinded by anger and hurt to let himself hear her words completely. "Once again, you disregarded my feelings. Once again, you didn't care! I hope you make Senator Jemabie *very* happy and that you two have a *perfect* life together. But *far away from me*."

"I came back because Kitster said you still loved me. Clearly, I was wrong." Padmé swallowed, wiping away her tears. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, your highness. As soon as I can get this door open, I'll go."

"Kitster is deluded. Whatever spell your assistant has him on, it's working." Anakin hissed before raising his hand and with a flick of his wrist, the doors opened. "Get out and I don't want to see you *ever* again, Padmé. *Ever*."

Tears now running freely down her face, Padmé turned away from him, slipping back into the party, looking desperately for Palo. She needed to get out of here. Honestly, she needed to break up with Palo. She couldn't ask him to give up being a Senator, and she couldn't tell him the truth.

"Senator Jemabie is talking with some members of the Council," the crystalline voice of the Princess interrupted Padmé's reverie. "But I would like to speak with you before you leave, Lady Naberrie."

"Princess, I really need to leave, I'm not feeling well," Padmé stammered, starting to panic. Had Amee seen her? Had she *heard*?

"I will let you be on your way, just a few seconds of your time," Amee quipped, grabbing Padmé's wrist. "It's about my fiancé. The Prince. Anakin. You know him, I mean, you were planning on eloping a year ago."

"That's in the past now, obviously," Padmé said, trying to pull away. "You have nothing to worry about, if that's what you wanted to ask me. Just... make sure he's happy."

"I will as soon as you are out of our lives," Amee said with her gracious smile intact. "Obviously, you affect him. In the worst possible way. I couldn't hear the words, but I can assure you I never heard him shout like that. I'll make sure he's happy. Make sure *you* stop popping into our lives like this."

"Make sure your future mother-in-law isn't plotting to get rid of you the way she did to me," Padmé replied. "Think whatever you want of me, Princess Amee, Force knows I despise myself every day for my cowardice, but watch your back. The Empress does *not* share her son."

"Fortunately, I know how to handle a bitter woman and I trust Anakin to protect me if the situation requires it. After he becomes Emperor, Shmi Skywalker will no longer be that much of a threat. I'll be the Emperor's Consort. But I'll take your advice to heart, Lady Naberrie," Amee said. "You should go now. For everyone's sake. Thanks for coming," she waved her fingers at the former Queen and turned to mingle with the crowd.

Padmé swallowed back further tears. It was as though Amee was the perfected version of everything *she* had tried to be. And all Padmé could do right now was think about running away and breaking up with Palo as she turned to leave the ballroom and then the palace. She certainly knew the way well enough, she could get a taxi speeder back to the hotel and leave from there...

"Padmé, wait." The commanding voice of the Empress Regent broke through the silent night as Shmi chased Padmé out of the Palace. "Please." She added.

"Why? So you can drive another knife through my heart as you remind me how I ruined my life and lost the only man I love?" the former Queen demanded furiously. "I did exactly what you wanted, and I'm suffering for it every day, what more can you possibly want from me?"

"For you to forgive me. Mostly, for you not to give up on Anakin just yet." Shmi swallowed the lump in her throat. "It's hard for me to admit when I'm wrong, but I do. What I

did last year to you and Anakin was the worst thing a mother could do, I realize that now. I am, however, trying to make amends.”

Padmé started laughing deliriously. “You cannot be serious. There is *nothing* you can do to make amends because clearly, Anakin doesn’t love me anymore. He found someone better when I couldn’t be what he wanted. And I am trying to move on with my life and failing horribly because it’s two parts trying to stay away from him and one part being forced to see him *constantly* on the HoloNet, being happy with someone who isn’t me. You *won*, Shmi, enjoy it and leave me to suffer with the crumbs of a life that are left to me.”

“Anakin is not in love with Aamee. The Princess is a means to an end. A friend he believes can make him happy in the long haul,” Shmi explained calmly. ‘My son has barely spoken with me for the past year. I thought what he felt for you was a crush. A simple infatuation that wouldn’t matter. But I never realized he loved you so deeply, Padmé, that your absence would destroy my son.’ Shmi descended a couple of more steps. “He is not happy. He settled. I don’t know what happened in the balcony or what he said, but Padmé, you’re still the woman he loves.”

“Of course, that’s why he looked me in the eye and told me he never wanted to see me again,” Padmé scoffed. “If you feel guilty, *good*. At least I’m not the only one who’s suffering now. But I still love Anakin enough that I will do what he wants. I am going to stay away.”

“You can’t give up on him again, Padmé, you need to understand he’s angry and lashing out and if you give him time, he’ll come—”

“SHUT UP!” Padmé screamed. “I don’t care, I don’t care how you think you can fix this, you should have never gotten involved! But you did, and now you have to deal with the consequences! So just *let me go!*” She started running down the steps again, refusing to look back.

8. Everyone has Regrets

Padmé sat, staring at the island across the lake. She hadn't managed to find it in her to break up with Palo. He was just too... *good*. He was everything she'd wanted when she'd been young and idealistic, and she couldn't find it in her to break his heart. Thankfully, Imperial Center had been nearly impossible to inhabit as more craftsmen and cooks and designers kept arriving for the Royal Wedding—she had to think of it like that, or she'd start crying—so Padmé had been able to keep things to just Zygerria and Naboo, and then just Naboo. The excuse she'd given Palo was that she was brainstorming her next project now that the Zygerrian empire was almost completely slavery-free and she wasn't needed anymore. He'd been all too understanding, of course. He was perfect like that.

So why couldn't she love him?

"Seeing you like this makes me want to paint again, you know." She turned around to see him standing there with a suitcase in hand.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, blinking in confusion as she stood up and went to hug him. "The Senate—"

"Out of session," he explained, setting the suitcase down and pecking her lips. "Thank the Force, traffic has gotten insane."

"Don't tell me." Padmé covered her ears, trying to make it seem like a joke. "I came here to get a clear mind."

"What is it about the Royal Wedding that leaves you so stressed? It's not like you're the bride," he chuckled. "She is the one that needs to be stressed. It's a big moment."

"It's too busy, I can't think there," Padmé said quickly. "And I feel like the amount of credits they're spending on this wedding could be used for other things. I mean, I can't imagine a wedding being that much of a spectacle. I always thought it should be something private and intimate."

"It's normal that the Crown Prince has a big celebration. They are trying to include the Galaxy in it. In the Royal Family, there is no private and intimate. You can see it whenever Prince Anakin and Princess Aamee leave for an engagement, they have HoloNet reporters constantly after them."

"Let's not talk about them anymore." Padmé sighed. "The Senate is out of session, we should do something for ourselves."

"That is an excellent idea. Would you like to do something, darling?"

"I could use a night out," she admitted, pursing her lips in thought. "I've basically been all alone here, Teckla stayed on Imperial Center to be with her boyfriend, and my creative impulses are stagnating. Would you be opposed to dinner at that restaurant where we used to go during school trips for the Legislative Youth Program?"

“Not at all, I think it’s a wonderful idea. I’ll call there and book us a table.”

“Great.” Padmé smiled and kissed his cheek. “I’ll go change and then we can head out. Okay?”

“I’ll wait forever for you,” Palo said as he took her hand and kissed her knuckles before letting her go.

Anakin couldn’t even wait a year. So why can’t I love you the way I love him?

“I am soooooo tired,” Amee complained as she collapsed on the couch next to Anakin. “I was standing all day while I was getting fitted for my dress, I think I need new legs.”

Anakin chuckled and leaned down to kiss her forehead and play with her hair, removing the pins that held the curls near her scalp with gentle care. “It’s practice,” he teased. “There won’t be too much sitting down time at our wedding. We’re a few weeks away from our wedding. How anxious are you?”

“I don’t think there are enough words. But at least I’m not drinking my way through the day the way your mother has been.”

Anakin sighed and after all the pins were removed, he began a gentle massage of her scalp. “She’ll come around. She hasn’t been too mean to you, has she?”

“Well, she hasn’t scared me off yet, which is more than I can say for some women,” Amee said, a hint of passive aggression in her voice.

The Prince hesitated but said nothing. “My mom is overprotective but she knows when to admit defeat. Only the good ones survive her, so it’s a good sign for us,” he said as he leaned down again and pecked her lips. “She’ll learn to love you as a daughter with time.”

“Maybe once I start giving her grandchildren,” Amee teased, rolling over to sit on his lap. “I get excited every time I think about that. Having a baby that looks like you, that’ll be adorable. Have you thought about that yet at all?”

“Of course,” Anakin admitted, but his smile did not reach his ears. “With a grandchild, it would give my mother someone else to fuss around than me, which would be a very good thing for you and I. How soon do you want a baby?” He easily wrapped his arms around her, hugging her close.

“I don’t know... I mean, the soonest we could really do it is eight and a half months after the wedding. And that’s assuming I’m fertile that day. But it’s up to you, too. When do *you* want one?”

“Well, I think we can start trying after our honeymoon. By then my coronation has passed, we had some private time away from this craziness and we can let nature take its course. When it’s time for us to have a child, it will happen. I am sure of it. Our royal heir. Or heiress.” He grinned and kissed her.

“Or both.” Amee laughed. “Ugh, can you imagine me with twins, I’d be giant.”

“Twins? Someone is eager to never sleep again in their life,” he teased.

"We can get a nanny," she pointed out. "Isn't that one of the perks of the royal life? We get to do the fun baby stuff and they handle the parts that aren't fun?"

"I guess," he frowned, the way Ameer spoke not matching the image of a family he had in his mind. Suddenly, he could picture it. A nursery, filled to the top with toys and natural light coming through the windows. A crib, or two, and a rocking chair. Then a woman, heavily pregnant, both of them feeling their child, or children, kicking within her womb and has he thought of the woman... the face he pictured was Padmé and his heart skipped a beat. "Well, I think that's something for us to discuss later. When you're actually expecting. We have a lot on our plates right now with the wedding," he said, clearing his throat.

"Yes, we do." Ameer sighed. "Oh, you should talk to your mother about whether or not you want to do a dance. Father and I are doing one."

"I'll speak with her. Actually, I'll do it now. I know she must be in her study." He kissed her cheek. "I'll meet you for dinner."

"Love you!" she said, waving happily as he got up. Anakin winked at her and left in search of his mother that was in that damned study again. He knocked on the door three times. "Mom?"

"Why are you doing this?" Shmi asked, her words slurred and muffled through the door before it opened. "You're making a mistake..."

Anakin sighed. "This study is a mistake, yet you insist on keeping it. Seriously, Mom, the Dark Side is so present here, I'm afraid it affects you sometimes."

"Hmph," she scowled, not even looking at him. "She's not going to make you happy. Fine, she'll be a good consort, but not a *wife*."

"I've chosen her. I came here to speak about a mother and son dance. Would you like one?" Anakin questioned.

"Will you be marrying a woman you actually love?" Shmi asked as she downed the rest of her glass.

"I love Ameer. Can you stop drinking?" Anakin scowled and took the glass from her hand. "Kriff, Mom, what the hell happened to you?"

"What happened to *you*?" she countered, trying to swipe the glass back. "Give it back, I'm still Regent."

Anakin pulled the glass further away from her grasp. "I fell in love with a woman and you made sure that I saw her true colors, Mom, that's what happened and while your methods were less than ideal, it did prove to me that my infatuation for Padmé Naberrie was never going to work out in the long haul," he explained. "Mom, if Padmé truly loved me, she would have stayed. Instead, she ran away. It proved to me that she will choose duty over us. That at the first sign of struggle, she would rather leave than face it together. Ameer stands by my side, no matter what. Not even your cranky humor and murderous looks have made her falter. In a way, I have to thank you. I know we had a rough year, but I'm going to get married, Mom, and we are planning on children as soon as possible and I want them to have a great Grandmother. The one I know you can be."

“Ani, no...” Shmi hiccuped. “Don’t do it, don’t... My fault, not hers.”

“It’s both of your faults. Mom, she didn’t fight for me. She just gave up and left. Padmé could have come to me and explain what you were doing and how she was feeling and we could have come to an agreement or a solution... bottom line is, she didn’t and I can’t trust her.” Anakin argued. “Now, can you get sober, please?”

“No,” Shmi said, turning away from him with a scowl. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Mom, if we want to get back to have a normal relationship, you have to let this go!” Anakin huffed. “Besides, Padmé is in a relationship with Senator Jemabie. We both moved on. Accept that.”

“You’re both settling.”

“We are both doing the right thing for us.”

“But it’s *not*,” his mother insisted petulantly.

Anakin sighed and held his Mom by the shoulders. “You’re drunk and I’m going to take you to your room and help you into bed. Like you said, you are still Regent and you have a reputation to protect. I love you, Mom, it’s really important for me to have your support.”

Shmi’s frown only deepened. “You’re making a mistake and you know it,” she warned. “You were smarter than this, Ani.”

“And you are better than this,” Anakin quipped and began leading her out of the study. “Come on. You need to rest.”

Palo was shifting in his chair and he hoped Padmé didn’t notice his odd behavior but he was about to do something unexpected for the woman standing in front of him. Ever since Padmé had re-entered his life, Palo knew what he wanted for his future. For Padmé to be his wife. They had common interests and they got along well. Both from Naboo, with similar upbringings. Besides, he had always been in love with the Queen, to have this opportunity thrown in his path, was a blessing.

“You look nervous, is everything okay?” Padmé asked, reaching out to take his hand. The gems on the red straps of her dress glittered in the candlelight of the restaurant. Her hair was twisted up, leaving her shoulders and neck bare and beautiful.

“Do you remember the first time we ever kissed?”

“You were fourteen and I was twelve, and we were visiting Moenia,” she said, pursing her lips in thought. ‘Your hair was curly then.’ She reached out to ruffle the now straight black hair. “But your eyes are the same.”

“And my feelings for you as well,” Palo said with a timid smile. “Padmé, I never forgot about you and ever since you came back into my life, I made a promise to myself I wouldn’t let you go this time.”

“Palo, we’ve been dating for six months, you don’t need to look so shy around me.”

"They have been the best six months of my life and it made me realize that this is what I want for the rest of my life. So," Palo stood from his chair, to get down on one knee by her side, taking a ring box from his pocket, opening it to show Padmé a beautiful ring, a family heirloom given to him by his mother, "Padmé Naberrie, will you give me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Padmé stared at the pale blue-green stone glittering up at her and swallowed. Anakin should not have been on her mind at this moment, and yet all she could think about was how this would make it final. Which was ridiculous, because it had been final from the moment she'd left him like a coward. Because he deserved better. And so did Palo. But Palo was here, and he wanted her, and she was *fond* of him, and...

"Yes," she said finally, extending her hand so that he could place the ring on her finger. "Yes, I will."

Palo's grin couldn't be wider and there was a brightness to his eyes that was simply endearing as he removed the ring from the box to slide it over her ring finger. It fit her perfectly and he took her hand and kissed it, standing up. "You have just made me the happiest man on this Galaxy, Padmé. I promise to make you happy for the rest of our lives."

"About that," she said, looking down at her hands for a moment. "I don't... Would you..."

"Yes?" Palo prompted. "You can ask me anything, love."

"How long were you planning to stay in the Senate?" she asked. "I just... I don't know how I can see us building a life splitting time between two planets." And it would keep her away from Anakin, just like he wanted.

"Well, I've had offers to work with the Queen in Naboo that I've been considering since we still haven't found a suitable Senator to replace me but that is something I can easily work with Queen Jamillia, and after we get married, I don't see why we shouldn't settle down in our home world. Near our families, have our children be raised with their cousins and grandparents."

"That sounds perfect," Padmé said in relief. "A new start."

"Just for us," he whispered before claiming her lips in a romantic kiss to seal their engagement. And it distracted them enough that they didn't see their serving droid watching them very intently.

"Let's not tell anyone about this just yet," Padmé whispered as she pulled away. "I don't... want to get lost in the madness of the royal wedding."

Shmi put aside her glass and started drinking straight from the bottle. This could *not* be happening. How could this be happening? How could Padmé...

No, she knew the answer. She flung the bottle aside and it smashed, much to Threepio's distress. "Oh, dear, oh, dear," he said, toddling off to find a cleaning droid.

"Get Kitster in here too," Shmi called after him.

“Master Banai is with Miss Teckla tonight, my lady,” the droid told her.

“Oh, *perfect*.”

“I think I should go find Master Ani.”

Anakin was in his bedroom having found five minutes of peace, away from the confusion of the preparations for his wedding with Ameer. In moments like this, he still didn’t believe he had made this decision as he was going to go forward with committing to Ameer. They were speaking about children already. Yet, why couldn’t he stop thinking about Padmé?

“Master Ani, your mother is watching some kind of holo feed and drinking very heavily, I think you may need to go speak to her again,” Threepio said. “I am terribly sorry to disturb you.”

“Thank you, Threepio,” Anakin made a face as he rushed out. That was the latest at the Palace, the Regent’s drinking problem which everyone had noticed. When he got into the study his mother’s back was to him, but he could see the holo playing in front of her all too clearly.

“Palo, we’ve been dating for six months, you don’t need to look so shy around me.”

“They have been the best six months of my life and it made me realize that this is what I want for the rest of my life. So, Padmé Nabberrie, will you give me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“Yes, yes, I will.”

“You have just made me the happiest man on this Galaxy, Padmé. I promise to make you happy for the rest of our lives.”

He believed he had gotten over Padmé and that his heart could not break further after what she did a year ago. But Anakin still felt something shatter within him, like a door closing to a possibility he secretly and wrongly held on to. He leaned against the doorway and felt his mouth go dry.

“She hesitated,” Shmi said quietly, not turning around.

“She said yes,” Anakin whispered. “Why wouldn’t she? I’ll be married in a few weeks. There was not a point in holding on to the past.”

“Is that really all you’re thinking?”

“Does it matter?” He shook his head. “We have both moved on.”

“Ani, don’t lie.”

“What do you want me to say?” Anakin snapped. “That even though I am engaged to another woman, Padmé still found a way to break my heart by effectively moving on after six months ago she told me she still loved me?” He got quiet after his outburst. “It doesn’t matter. Padmé and I are completely ruined. It’s me and Ameer and her and Palo now. That is how our lives are meant to be,”

“I thought the Jedi had taught you better than that.”

"None of the Jedi are going to be the next Emperor. I have a duty to my Galaxy to provide them with stability and an heir to my bloodline." Anakin argued. "Mom, it's time you truly give up. Let Padmé live her new life in peace."

"Anakin... neither of you will be happy."

"You don't know that. I'm... happy. Amee makes me happy and whatever lingering feelings I might harbor for Padmé, Mom, they'll disappear."

"No, they won't." Shmi insisted. "I *know*. I've tried to do it, I couldn't."

"What are you talking about?" Anakin frowned.

"Before I married your father, I..." Shmi sighed. "It didn't work out. But I told myself I could love your father, that I could be a good wife and a good Empress, and I couldn't."

"You never spoke to me about your life before you married to the Emperor, Mom," Anakin said softly and sat down. "Tell me. Who was he?"

"Rusjay Marcsam," she said dreamily. "He worked for us before the debt got too bad, it never would have worked, but I wanted him desperately."

"Let me guess, my grandparents weren't too keen on having their daughter married to the help?" He raised his eyebrows, smiling softly at the way his mother spoke about her past love.

"Your grandparents had no idea, they were too busy trying to find matches for me and my siblings that would get *them* out of poverty," Shmi scoffed bitterly.

"There's a bunch of other family members around that I never met, isn't there?" he teased. "So if it wasn't them, what stopped you two from being together?"

"He was sent to work elsewhere, and I was shipped off to Coruscant to marry your father."

"That's it?" Anakin said incredulously. "So much love and you did nothing?"

"And I've regretted it. Don't make my mistakes, Ani."

"Unless Rusjay broke your heart on what was supposed to be your wedding day, it's not the same. Padmé and I had a real chance. We were eloping and all the stars were aligned for us. But it was spontaneous madness thinking we would get away with it and that we were allowed such happiness. She broke me. Don't compare the situations, Mom." Anakin argued and spoke with an empty voice. "I am sorry that you weren't able to follow your heart. Maybe you would have been happier."

"She came back for you. Rusjay never did that for me," Shmi sighed. "You cannot make yourself love someone else when your heart's chosen someone else. No matter how hard you try."

"It's too late. Amee is the right choice for the position I will accept, soon, before the Galaxy. I want to be selfish, Mom, I want someone that will always choose me and I don't trust Padmé to do it. To put us first before duty. I appreciate you trying but you should let it go and accept that I will marry Amee and Padmé will..." he swallowed, "become Senator Jemabie's wife."

Shmi said nothing, just shook her head.

"I still need to know about that mother and son dance," Anakin asked, squeezing her hand.

"I will let you know. Soon."

"Really, Mom, the wedding is in three weeks."

"I know."

"I'm extending a peace offering here, I don't want us to fight anymore and Padmé needs to stop coming between me and my family. I barely speak to Kitster as it is and I will probably need to ask Rex to come up there and be at my side." Anakin scowled.

"I'm drunk right now," she reminded him. "Let me be."

"You're always drunk these days," he said dryly. "You're not the woman I remember." Anakin turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. Shmi then sat up and stroked her chin in thought. There was one weak link in the chain, and she had been neglecting it.

"Senator Jemabie to see you, your majesty," her secretary announced.

"Ah, wonderful, send him in," Shmi said, a hint of a delight to her tone as she rose from her seat ready to meet the Senator of Naboo.

"Your majesty," he said, bowing. "To what do I owe the honor of this meeting? I had to cut my vacation with my fi—girlfriend short."

"I apologize for the inconvenience, Senator and I do wish to congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials," Shmi smiled sweetly, and Palo blinked in confusion. "Will you accept a drink?"

"How did you know Padmé and I are engaged?"

"I'm the Empress, Senator, I try to keep informed about key people of this Galaxy," even without an answer from Palo, Shmi poured them two glasses of toniray. She picked one and offered it to Palo. "Padmé Naberrie is one of those key people."

"Padmé hasn't been involved in politics since her term as Queen ended," Palo pointed out, sipping the Alderaanian liquor somewhat nervously.

"My interest over Lady Naberrie is not political," Shmi said as she sat down and invited Palo to do the same. "It's personal. Related to my son."

"I know the Prince sponsors her organization, but I don't think that's exactly a personal matter," Palo said, setting down the glass. "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"You would if your *fiancée* had told you the truth about her relationship with the Prince. A year ago they were planning on eloping. Madly in love." Shmi said nonchalantly, taking a small sip from her drink and leaning back in her chair. "Even consummated the marriage the previous night, just to make sure they checked everything on the list."

Palo's jaw dropped, and he shook his head. "No. No, she wouldn't keep something like that from me."

"It's obvious why she has done it," Shmi said. "Her feelings for Anakin remain and she did not want to hurt you by telling you the truth of why exactly you two crossed paths in Imperial Center. Poor Padmé was returning to the Palace to confess to my son she was still in love with him when Anakin announced publicly his engagement to the Princess of Aquilae."

"But she's with me now," Palo insisted slowly, clearly still processing everything. "Why does... the past matter?"

"Padmé has asked you to resign from your position in the Senate, hasn't she?" Shmi guessed and as Palo nodded, she went on. "She has done that because living in the same city as the man she truly loves, will be hurtful. Padmé is with you because Anakin is still engaged, but you can't erase a love like that, Senator Jemabie. It might not happen today. Or next week. Maybe not even in a year but eventually, you will be married to the Emperor's mistress."

"We're going to live on Naboo," he protested. "Your majesty, I don't appreciate you slandering my future wife like this. I don't believe any of this."

"Senator, you might find my methods ruthless, but I guarantee you, I have all of our best interests at heart. Padmé will not be able to make you happy, not when her heart belongs to another. You will have to share her for the rest of your lives. Wonder if, when her mind wanders, she is thinking about *him*. When she needs to do business in Imperial Center, will she seek *him* out? Will you live a life like that? Always in doubt if she chose you or if she settled for you. A friend, a confidante, someone she cares for but is not in love with. Is that a life worth living?"

"It's not true, she would not do that to me," Palo said, standing to leave. "And I won't hear another word of it."

"Confront your fiancée," Shmi said bluntly. "Before you get into a marriage that will become ridiculed when Padmé returns to Anakin's arms, no matter their marital status."

"I understand now why Padmé was so desperate to stay away from your family," Palo said as he reached the door. "Does it bring you pleasure, making other people miserable like this so you can feel right?"

"I am trying to help you, Senator," Shmi stood. 'If you speak with Padmé, you will understand my words. I used to think true love was a fairytale until last year, when I saw Padmé and Anakin, so taken with each other. Pure, intense love that electrifies you and leaves you lightheaded, where you feel you can conquer the Galaxy.' She paused. "Do you two have that?" The Empress asked quietly.

"Of course." But there was a tremble in Palo's voice that hadn't been there before.

"Hmm. I trust you will do the right thing, Senator." Palo's hesitation and the doubt in his eyes was all Shmi wanted. She knew that the Senator would speak with his "fiancée" and she knew what he would see in her for it was the same thing she saw in Anakin. A love that would only belong to them and two broken hearts who just needed a little push to heal.

9. A Series of Bitter Pills

“Your Highness, there’s a representative from—”

“Never mind that, I’ll show myself in.” Before Anakin could say anything or even get up from his seat, Padmé stormed into his office and slapped him across the face. Hard. “*What is wrong with you?!?*”

The Prince was completely caught off guard but he immediately raised his hand to stop the troops from approaching and restrain Padmé, and he waved them to leave them alone. The two clones looked suspicious but quietly retreated and closed the doors. Anakin took one hand to his cheek and made a face. “I could ask you the same kriffing thing,” he muttered. “I could have you arrested for treason for attacking the Crown Prince.”

“Be glad that I did that because the alternative was me going to the first reporter that would take me and telling them all about us!” Padmé shouted, pacing furiously in front of him. Anakin widened her eyes, surprised at the rage in her voice. He hasn’t done anything to her! Unless... *Mom!* “I don’t understand what you kriffing want from me, Anakin! You tell me to stay away, and I do, despite the fact that it makes me feel like I’m dying. I do what you want and say yes when Palo asks me to marry him, and then we come back here because he’s been summoned to the palace, and when he returns, all he asks me is if it’s true. If you and I were together. And just like that, my engagement is over!”

“You think I broke off your engagement to Senator Jemabie?” Anakin asked bewildered. ‘I didn’t! I was going to send you both my *regards* and true wishes of happiness.’ He said with a hint of sarcasm. “You can’t just come storming into my office, making wrong assumptions like this, Padmé, or attack me out of the blue!”

“Every day, there are fewer and fewer things that I can do, so you know what, I *am* going to go to the HoloNet now. Maybe I’ll even start a Rebellion, I don’t care!” She threw up her hands. “It’s not like I have anything else to do, given my fiancé just *left!*”

“Don’t be insane, Padmé,” he hissed, already irritated. *Somehow, I know my mother is involved in this mess.* “I’m getting married in two weeks and the last thing I need is a scandal and you know it. I’m sure if you speak with the Senator, he’ll come around and your engagement will happen. I don’t know how he knew about us, but I can guarantee you I didn’t summon him to the Palace to tell him on purpose.”

“No, he won’t!” Now Padmé started to cry. “He made it very clear that he wasn’t coming back.”

“I’ll speak with him.”

“Haven’t you already done enough?” she demanded, sounding unhinged. “It’s only a matter of time before this gets out, and I’m going to be the one who pays for it. People will say I’m your mistress, or your whore, or damaged goods, my entire family will be humiliated, my life’s work will be destroyed, and for what? The fact that I love you and lost you because of one moment of fear? Isn’t the pain of losing you punishment enough?”

Anakin was having enough of her delirious rant and took one step forward, wrapping his arms around her waist and locking their lips in a desperate kiss. Her words sinking into him and making him wonder *what if*. The kiss softened but he didn't pull away, regretfully comparing it to the kisses he shared with Amee. There was no spark, no passion or undeniable need with his fiancée and kissing Padmé felt like fireworks, an adrenaline rush and a high he didn't want to end. Her hands found his chest and then his face, she leaned into him, her tongue was brushing through his lips and suddenly it was like they were back in his bedroom, unaware of their own destruction right around the corner.

Finally, she pulled away for air and her head collapsed against his chest as she wept. "I might die," she confessed, her voice muffled by his clothes and his skin. "The day you marry her, I think it might kill me."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. How did it come to this? He had made a commitment to Amee and everything was in place for their wedding, his coronation. He had a stable life lying ahead, a dutiful wife to stand at his side and a good alliance for the Galaxy. "I..." he hesitated. "You left once without looking back, I'm sure you can do it again. I'll protect you as much as I can and make sure your reputation does not get tainted, no one has to know... I can't... Amee and I..." he sighed, feeling ill.

"I know." She pulled away, wiping the tears from her face. 'I'm sorry, I'll go. It was a mistake for me to even come here.' He didn't want to let her go even if he knew he had to. He was a man of his word and he couldn't fail Amee so miserably. "I... I hope you get everything you deserve."

There was a sense of desperation at realizing she was leaving again, but he froze. She was leaving and he could do something about it, but he remained stoic when he knew what he truly wanted to do. It was a helplessness that left him crippled as he felt her escape between his fingers like sand.

"G-goodbye," Padmé whispered as she stepped back. He didn't move. "Anakin... I... I promise you'll never have to see me again. I mean it this time."

He just closed his eyes and turned his back, supporting himself against the desk. His mind was screaming at him to grab her and keep her there. Never let her go because it felt final. She would leave and he would be married and it was... was over.

"Padmé, wait, I..." as he turned around, she had already left. He blinked as a lonely tear fell down his cheek and felt his barely healed heart break all over again and this time, he could have stopped it. "Don't go." He whispered to the empty room.

"You could stay a little longer."

"No, Teckla, this... I can't stay here any longer, it's just torturing myself unnecessarily," Padmé said as she folded her dresses and shoved them into her suitcases. "You and Kitster don't need me hanging around."

"What happened?"

"I told you, I don't want to talk about it," Padmé slammed her jewelry box down into the case. "I *can't* be here."

"There's still time to convince Anakin to—"

"Do not say another word, Kitster," she cut him off. "I should never have listened to you."

"You were the one who listened to Shmi. And who said no when—"

"ENOUGH!" Padmé shouted so loudly that R2-D2 screeched from the foyer. 'Now, look, you made me upset him,' she scolded, abandoning her packing to go soothe her frazzled astromech. "It's alright," she said, rubbing his dome. "It's fine, we're going home soon."

The droid beeped and chirped and Padmé sighed. He was too perceptive sometimes. He was going back to charging when someone appeared on the holoscreen of the hallway, and he started beeping. Padmé's face paled as she recognized Princess Ameer and her clone escort. "I know you're in there, Lady Naberrie," Ameer said coolly. "I would like to speak with you. Now."

Padmé glanced over her shoulder. "Artoo, go into the bedroom and keep Kitster and Teckla there until I'm done, please?" Her droid beeped in affirmation and wheeled away into the bedroom. Swallowing, Padmé opened the door for the fiancée of the man she loved. 'It's an honor to have you here, your highness,' she said finally. "Please, come in."

Ameer signaled the clone to remain at the door and entered the room, her face covered with an indecipherable expression. "Thank you, Lady Naberrie. I won't take much of your time." The Princess looked around the foyer, before turning to face Padmé directly. "You're in love with my fiancé." It wasn't a question.

"That doesn't matter," Padmé said just as bluntly. "I had my chance and I threw it away. He's marrying you, and that's the end of it. I'm leaving Imperial Center for good in three days, and the only reason it's not sooner is that my ship is getting repairs."

"It matters because he's in love with you too," Ameer said, an edge to her voice as she struggled to keep her poise. 'I saw the both of you today in his office,' she confessed. "The way he kissed you..." she shook her head. "He's sweet with me, but he never showed me that kind of passion. When he's around you it's... like he comes alive, becomes electrified or something... I don't want to be the woman he settles for."

"He's not settling for you," Padmé said automatically, then realized what Ameer had said. "How much... how much did you hear?"

"Enough to know that my marriage will never work out," Ameer whispered. 'I am in love with him. I always have been. It's easy to fall in love with a man like that, isn't it?' She shook her head. "Anakin is not going to forget you. I want to believe he will and we might be happy for one year, or two, when we have the first little prince or princess. But in the end..." Ameer bit her tongue. "In the end, there will always be you. *You!* I will always come second to you. I will always lose to you."

"I'm sorry." It was all she really could say. "If I could undo the wrong choices I've made, I would, but I can't. And he chose *you*. He wouldn't have done that if he didn't believe you were the one who could heal the wounds I caused."

"I was the right choice from a political angle," Amee argued bitterly. "I know he cares for me. But as a friend. He will never look at me with the same fire and desire he looks at you and, trust me, I have tried, but I don't capture his interest. Marrying will only mean one thing. That I'll eventually have to share him with you because you can find it appalling *now* but as soon as he knocks at your door, you will fall into his arms and you will give him the love he seeks. I can't... I won't submit myself to that." She stated firmly.

"You will have to do no such thing," Padmé insisted firmly. 'There will never be a reason for him to knock on my door.' Ever since her confession in Anakin's office, she'd been quietly turning over the idea of... following through. Amee's visit was only strengthening her resolve. "He'll need you."

"I will never be enough," she whispered. "Tell me something and please, you need to be completely honest. Our lives depend on your honesty and not your martyr instinct."

"I've been nothing but honest."

Amee took a deep breath. "If our wedding falls through... will you break his heart again?"

Padmé frowned. "Don't talk like that. It won't happen, he wouldn't do that to you."

"I asked you a question. If Anakin becomes available, will you break his heart once more or try again and make him happy?" Amee scowled.

"Don't leave him."

"*Kriff*, Padmé, answer the blasted question!" Amee narrowed her eyes. "What I'm asking you is simple. Do you want him back, all to yourself, or not?"

"Of course I do, but that doesn't matter!"

"You are so full of '*but*' and '*if*,' aren't you? If you knew what you wanted in the first place, this situation would have never happened!" Amee shook her head. "I've made my decision and I want to make sure I'm doing the right thing."

"What do you think I was doing?" Padmé shot back. "That martyr's instinct you criticize is a part of me! It held me paralyzed as I thought about what was right, I *knew* that he could have done whatever he needed to make what I wanted to happen, but I couldn't shake the cost it would carry. How many lives would be lost, what it would say to the galaxy for a newly made Emperor to plunge them into war for the whims of his new wife? And that was not a price I was willing to make others pay."

"You had your selfless moment. But, Padmé, he's going to need you to be selfish. For a while. You need to choose him." Amee looked down at her glittering engagement ring. "Anakin deserves to be happy with the woman he loves by his side. That is not me." She brushed past Padmé towards the exit, feeling herself suffocate.

"You can't just..." Padmé felt her shoulders slump as Amee left. Anakin was going to blame her for this. For ruining his happiness yet again. There was no way in the universe that he'd want her *back*.

“Master Ani, Princess Amee is requesting you join her in her suite,” Threepio announced. “She said it was rather important.”

Anakin winced. He felt ashamed. He had basically betrayed Amee that afternoon with Padmé and Amee didn’t deserve it. She was such an amazing person and he was convinced that she would become an even better Consort. “I’ll be right there, Threepio. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome, Master Ani,” the droid called as cheerfully as his programming allowed him to.

At least someone is chirpy. Anakin thought amused as he left for his bride’s suite. “Amee? Can I come in?”

“The door’s open. Just walk in.” Her voice sounded oddly distant.

Frowning, Anakin pushed the door open and entered her suite, freezing as he laid his eyes on her, wearing a dazzling wedding gown, strapless and silky white, hugging her slim figure and making her *glow*. “Oh. Wow. Amee, you’re beautiful,” he mumbled as he approached her in a haze. “But isn’t it bad luck for me to see the dress before the ceremony?” he asked softly.

“There isn’t going to be a ceremony,” Amee answered as she ran her hands up and down the intricate bodice. “So I thought you should see me in this dress at least once.”

“What do you mean?” He frowned. ‘Of course there’s going to be a ceremony. Remember I got down on one knee? Proposed? I’ve tasted more variety of cakes over the past six months than I did in twenty-one years of life?’ Anakin teased her softly. “What’s wrong?”

“Anakin, I’m not joking,” she said severely. “I saw you with Padmé today. I was coming to surprise you, and I saw you kissing her.”

The Prince paled and didn’t bother trying to deny it. “Amee, I’m so sorry. So, incredibly sorry. It was a moment of weakness but I can guarantee you nothing like it will ever happen again. I’ll be completely dedicated to you and the family we’ll build together,” he said and took her hands. “You didn’t deserve to see me kiss another woman and I feel bad for hurting you.”

“No, you won’t,” Amee told him calmly. “Because the two of you are still in love with each other, and I refuse to compete with her. Even if you never see her again, I’m never going to measure up. And I deserve better than being the person you settle for.”

“Amee, listen to me, I understand you are concerned about Padmé and yes, I should have been honest with you from the beginning. What happened between us is something that I wasn’t able to get over in a year, but we have the rest of our lives and I do want to make you happy and I will try my very best to be the man you deserve,” Anakin argued, shaking his head. “Padmé and I are something from the past. You and I, we are the future.”

“Stop it.” Amee put a finger over his lips. “Just stop.”

“Don’t break this up,” he insisted, beginning to get desperate. “Please. Amee… we have a whole life to build and I am not settling. I’m not.”

“You have a life to build. With Padmé. She might be an infuriating self-sacrificing martyr, but she loves you. Enough that I think she might actually die when you marry someone else.”

Anakin shook his head. “No, no, Padmé has her life. Just like I have mine. We had a chance to have a life together and it fell apart in minutes. I can’t go through that again, no matter what anyone says and you shouldn’t get influenced like that!”

“Anakin. If I told you she was waiting for you right now and that you had the chance to get her back and to have everything you ever wanted, would you really try to tell me you don’t want that?”

He pulled away, scowling. “Don’t do that. Do say things like that. Force! Did my mother or Kitster speak with you? You shouldn’t listen to their crazy ideas! This is about *us* and how you are walking away from me because there’s this remote chance I might get together with my ex-girlfriend, which you can’t really say it was a *girlfriend* because we were together for a *month* and basically went stir crazy locked up in a Palace and decided to elope.” He ranted as he paced in front of Amee.

“You kiss her in a way you’ve never kissed me,” Amee pointed out simply. “And I’ve made up my mind.”

“Don’t do this,” he asked, one more time, in a whisper.

“Don’t make me live a lie,” she countered.

Anakin shook his head and looked down. “Amee...” He couldn’t tell her to leave or ask her to stay. He was torn and it was agony.

“Can you kiss me like you kiss her?” Amee challenged, clenching her fist tightly.

“It’s different. Both of you are different, why are you doing this? We were so close to getting married.” He said frustrated.

“Why did you kiss her? We were so close to getting married?” she said, throwing his words back at him. “She’s free, Anakin, and now you are too. You should just stop denying yourselves what you really want.”

“It didn’t have to be like this,” Anakin argued softly.

“Anakin, I’ve made up my mind. You can’t change it.” She took his hand and pressed her fist into it until he felt the metal and gems of her engagement ring. “I’m going to find someone who feels about me the way you do about her.”

Anakin looked down at the ring helplessly and shook his head. “I hope you find him. You deserve someone like that, Amee, and I never meant to hurt you.” He confessed. Looking up, he kissed her forehead. “You’re going to have to forgive me for this, I believed I could love you and make you happy as you deserve. My intention was never that our relationship ended like this and I was ready to make a commitment.”

“One we would have both regretted. Maybe not at first, but eventually,” she sighed. “If she *does* hurt you again, though... I’m first in line to kill her.”

“*If* we try again to make something work, it’s going to be different from last time, but I don’t even know what’s going to happen, Amee, I’m going to be the Emperor and jumping from courtship to courtship is crazy. What kind of image am I giving to the Galaxy? Playboy Prince who goes from woman to woman?” Anakin sighed. “Telling the Galaxy about our

break up is going to be complicated enough. I need to wait before I announce another courtship so soon.”

“Forget about that right now,” Amee chided him. “And go see her. She’s packing to leave as we speak.”

“I can’t... I can’t do it right now,” he shook his head. ‘It’s not... this is not right.’ Anakin made a face. “I hope you find someone that makes you happy, Amee, and I’ll keep my word to your planet, marriage or not, the alliance will remain. Please take an escort with you once you leave and let the public relations of the Palace handle the HoloNet. I don’t... I don’t want to deal with them right now, I...” he swallowed the lump in his throat. “Thank you,” he just whispered and kissed her cheek, before leaving her suite and her behind.

“Shmi,” Rakir cleared his throat politely. “You’ve been staring at that report for hours.”

“Get your son focused, he’s been spending entirely too much time with his Naboo girlfriend,” the Empress snapped irritably.

“Wife, actually, he and Teckla eloped a few weeks ago,” Rakir corrected with a smile. “Which I’m sure has nothing to do with her sudden morning sickness.”

“Congratulations on your son’s impending fatherhood,” Shmi raised her eyebrows.

“They’re both very happy about it. As I’m sure Anakin and Amee will be when they start their own family,” the general added benignly.

Shmi made a face. “I hope they don’t go down that road just yet. It would be a crime to bring a child into a loveless marriage.”

“Why are you so convinced that they’re not fond of each other?” Rakir scolded. “Anakin’s about to be Emperor, you need to stop treating him like a child.”

The Empress was going to reply when they were interrupted by a frazzled Threepio walking in without requesting permission. “My lady, my lady, Master Ani’s engagement to Princess Amee is off. This is terrible news!” He said miserably.

“What?” the two of them said in unison, but Shmi was using it to cover up her delight. It had *worked*.

“Princess Amee is leaving this evening to Aquilae and Master Ani refuses to leave his rooms,” Threepio fussed. “What a sad, sad day. Poor Master Ani. The Palace has orders to issue a statement, your majesty, but the public relations is asking for your input, given that Master Ani is not cooperating. Oh dear, oh dear, what a terrible day.”

Rakir turned to Shmi with disbelief. “What did you do this time?” He asked bluntly.

“To Amee? Nothing!” Shmi said truthfully. “I accepted Anakin’s decision, I just didn’t like it.”

The General eyed her suspiciously. “Amee was completely in love with Anakin, she wouldn’t just *leave*. And I don’t see you standing by and doing nothing, Shmi.”

"I did nothing to Amee," Shmi repeated. "And right now, I am going to go talk to my son, Rakir."

"Thankfully, you're sober," Rakir snorted. "An unusual thing these days."

"I can still have you deployed to the Outer Rim, General Banai, don't push your luck," she warned, smoothing down her dress.

"You need me too much, your majesty," the General quipped. "I will see if I can find Kitster and let him know what's happening. His friendship with Anakin has been very fragile this last year and I'm hoping it recovers. Anakin could use a friend."

"Do remember to give him and his wife my congratulations," Shmi called smugly.

Rakir chuckled. "I will, your majesty. Please keep in mind that your son might not be very receptive today. Don't push him. You remember what happened last time."

"It is seared into my brain, Rakir," the Empress muttered. "And I can handle the press for him—"

"Stars, no, let me do it before you begin grinning like a madwoman at your son's broken engagement," Rakir interrupted, narrowing his eyes. "I'll handle it. Go see Anakin. Go."

"I know where he is," Shmi said calmly. "And I am better at hiding my feelings than you seem to think. Or have you forgotten how I smiled my way through my entire marriage?"

"No. I didn't," he whispered. 'It is seared into my brain,' Rakir repeated her words. "Now go find Anakin, let me deal with the HoloNet. I'll make sure neither Anakin or Amee gets any bad repercussions."

"Fine," Shmi huffed. 'I know exactly where Anakin will be.' Though she hoped she was wrong. She hoped that Anakin would be running to Padmé, not stewing and sulking in his workshop. Unfortunately, she was completely right, and he was lying under an Eta-2 Actis-class interceptor, the smell of grease permeating the air. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he said flatly as he kept working without hesitating or acknowledging her presence.

"If you change your mind, let me know. And Rakir is addressing the press, so he's who you'll want to comm if you want to make a statement."

"Mhm," Anakin hummed dismissively.

"I can have the kitchens make you something if you want."

"I'm not hungry." He replied in the same uninterested voice.

"You get hungry when you're in here for a long time and forget to eat."

Still, he barely moved from his position and the silence was deafening. "Well, I'm not hungry."

"I'll have something sent up later," she said. "Ani, I *am* sorry."

A sigh. "Whatever, Mom, what's done is done. Just... leave me alone, I don't want to talk about it."

“Ani... they’re going to ask you about the coronation, you’re going to have to have an answer ready.”

“I do. You can tell Rakir the coronation will just be delayed a few weeks, but it will still happen. That is the only certainty that I have right now.” Anakin replied. Shmi blinked in surprise.

“Ani, no one would fault you for waiting a little longer.”

“What’s the point?” He asked bitterly. “There’s nothing left for me to do, anyway, and this is the one thing I know that will go as planned. I’m tired of talks of courtship, weddings, and alliances. I want it all to go to Sith hell, honestly.”

“I’ll make sure to keep the press away from you,” Shmi said, shaking her head. This was not what she’d wanted.

“You can also return all the gifts that were sent.” Anakin added. “I want all the decorations gone by tomorrow. Donate the food that was being prepared for the reception to the shelters. I want this Palace back to normal.”

“Of course,” Shmi nodded, noticing the diamond and silver band sitting on the workbench and carefully picked it up. “And the ring you commissioned?”

“Sell it and donate the credits to the orphanage.”

Shmi bit down the urge to ask about Amidala’s Crusade, and why it was not receiving any of the funding. It would not look good to the press, after all.

“Do you need anything else, Mom?” Anakin asked.

“What I need isn’t important, Ani, this is about you right now.”

He snorted. “Isn’t it always?” Sighing, he slid from underneath the interceptor and sat on the floor, wiping his brow. “I just want to focus on becoming Emperor. As you said, I don’t need an alliance. I can do it alone and that is what I’ll be doing.”

“I understand.” *And I can be patient.*

Anakin turned to her, still standing there. “What? Is there anything else?”

“I love you. I hope you know that.”

He nodded. “I do.” Grabbing his tools, he stood up and set them down on the bench, grabbing a datapad to check on his progress with the interceptor.

“Remember to eat.” Her son merely rolled his eyes, and Shmi stepped out of the workshop. It seemed she would have to enlist Kitster’s help to get things back on track.

Anakin watched his mother leave and leaned against the bench, taking a deep breath. For a second, he wondered if she was going to ask about Padmé. Or if he had any idea on what to do now that he was no longer committed. He didn’t have a truthful answer for her. He was still absorbing everything that had transpired. But what Anakin knew is that he couldn’t leave an engagement to begin another. Where was his credibility? He had been “courting” Satine when she left him for Obi-Wan. Then, immediately after, came Aamee. Who had now left him too. It was insane to begin a *third* courtship in less than a year. It would strip him of his

credibility and he wanted the Galaxy to focus on what he could do as the Emperor and not the woman he was chasing next.

10. Executive Meddling

“Hey.”

Anakin blinked, lifting his eyes from the datapad to his estranged friend. “Since I’m no longer engaged, I earned visitations rights from my *best* friend?” He raised his eyebrows.

“You told me to stay away,” Kitster pointed out. “Also, birth control kind of failed me, and Teckla and I took a week to elope. So I’ve been a little busy.”

The Prince opened and closed his mouth. “Oh. Uh. Congratulations?”

“Thanks. I’m sorry about your engagement to Amee. Really. I know you probably don’t believe me, but I just want you to be happy, Anakin.”

He nodded, slowly. “For the record, I never told you to stay away. You choose Padmé’s side over mine.” Anakin shrugged. “You never accepted my engagement with Amee and decided to *stay* away.”

“I don’t understand, why did it end?” Kitster said, ignoring Anakin’s accusation.

“Because of Padmé. Everything that happens in my life nowadays is constantly related to her. It shouldn’t come as a surprise really.”

“Padmé is currently out with Teckla for a goodbye dinner,” Kitster said, frowning. “And then she’s going back to Naboo. And she’s never coming back, she’s been pretty clear about that.”

“Your point being?” Anakin asked dryly.

“Anakin, I didn’t want to say anything to her face because I knew she’d deny it, but I’m kind of worried she’s going to do something drastic.”

“My engagement has been publicly called off. What else do you want me to do?” Anakin scowled.

“Go talk to her like a sensible adult,” Kitster said simply. “I’m not saying get back together with her, or anything like that, just... You two haven’t ever talked about it without it turning into at least one of you crying.”

“Which is the kind of relationship everyone hopes for,” Anakin quipped sarcastically. “Who knew you and my mom would be best buddies on this matter?” He huffed. “You know what... *whatever*... fine. I’ll ask Rex to take me to her hotel so I can knock on her door and tell her my engagement is off *in person* and wish her a safe trip back to Naboo.”

“That’s the spirit,” Kitster said sarcastically. “Maybe I can bring Teckla around to the idea of naming our son after you.”

“I think it’s a great baby name, actually,” Anakin replied cheekily. “It would assure that the baby’s cute at least.”

“So what went wrong with you?”

Anakin raised one eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“Teasing,” Kitster smirked. “We used to do that, remember?”

“Ah, yes, the times before you preferred a perfect stranger to your best friend. Those were good times.”

“If you keep talking about my wife like that, I take it back, we’re not friends anymore.”

“I’m talking about your wife’s boss.” Anakin rolled his eyes.

“Teckla isn’t employed by anyone, actually. She quit.”

“You know *who* I mean, Kitster,” he scowled. “I look forward to seeing Teckla around the Palace. Hey, maybe my mom can fuss over you two and your child, and finally give me some room to breathe. How’s that?”

“Perfect,” Kitster rolled his eyes. “Are you going to get the grease off your face first?”

Anakin grabbed the rag and removed the grease stains from his face. “I’m going to the hotel. The only thing I’m going to do is deliver the news in person. Don’t you and my mom have any ideas.”

“No ideas whatsoever. Promise.”

The Prince rolled his eyes and snorted. “Yeah, right.” He brushed past Kitster and out of the room, comming Rex to meet him at the hangar. He didn’t want anyone to notice he was gone and the HoloReporters haven’t left the Palace grounds, eager to get an interview, a quote, *anything* really and Anakin did not want to give them anything at all.

The only reason he was even going was because of Kitster and Teckla’s concern. Amee had already said something that took him back to what Padmé had said the last time and he wouldn’t feel alright with himself if he didn’t at least stop by before she left for Naboo.

Padmé was sitting next to Artoo watching a crime procedural on the viewscreen, the way she had been since Teckla went home early complaining of a headache and nausea. “Who do you think did it, Artoo?” she asked fondly, and the droid beeped. “No way.”

There was a knock at the door and she looked at the droid. “Did you order room service for me?” His dome spun in protest. ‘Huh.’ She pulled her robe closed as she went to the door and opened it. Only to step back when she saw it was Anakin. “What are you doing here?”

“Is it a good time?” He ignored her question. “I won’t take long.”

“Shouldn’t you be with your fiancée, preparing for your wedding?” she asked, pulling the robe a little tighter against her body.

“How long has it been since you’ve watched the HoloNews?” Anakin asked surprised.

“Not since I left your office. I’ve been preparing to leave.”

“Clearly. Otherwise, you would have known that Ameer has called off our engagement.” Anakin pursed his lips. “She has returned to Aquilae.”

Padmé blinked three times. “I told her not to.”

“You spoke with her?” He asked, surprised. “Ameer didn’t tell me that. It... it doesn’t matter though. Even if you told her *no*, she still went ahead and did it. I don’t want to focus too much on that. What’s done is done, nothing is going to change anyway.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To give you the news in person as promised to a friend,” Anakin replied.

“Well, now you have. So, good night.” She started to close the door on him.

“I thought as much,” he muttered quietly to himself and turned around to leave as he saw the door close. Then Artoo barreled into Padmé, knocking her backward into Anakin and flinging her robe open in the process.

“Artoo-Deetoo, what is the matter with you!” she scolded, trying to put her sleepwear right and accidentally giving Anakin a flash of her breasts. “I’m sorry, he’s always been a little... eccentric.”

“Or he just fell in love with me. Five minutes in and *he’s* already running after me,” Anakin joked and his cheeks had a little pink color as he helped her stay upright. ‘That’s more than anyone ever did. Maybe I should take *you* with me,’ he turned to Artoo and winked. “I always wanted an R2 unit.”

“Well, you can’t take him, he’s mine,” Padmé said defensively. “He saved my life, we’ve got a connection.”

“I’m just teasing.” He cleared his throat.

“Clearly,” she sighed. “And I’ve probably missed something vital on my procedural now. Because that’s the highlights I have to look forward to in my life from now on. Good luck with your coronation.”

Anakin’s nostrils flared, but he said nothing, biting his tongue. “Have a safe trip back to Naboo,” he replied, letting her go completely and pulling away, scowling. “Why do I bother?” He hissed, more to himself, shaking his head and grabbing his comm to warn Rex to be ready for their departure.

“You tell me, I thought we’d made a pretty clear end to things after *you* kissed me!”

“I was *engaged* to another woman,” Anakin argued. ‘A woman that broke things off with me because of *you*. Honestly, everything that happens to me nowadays is **because** of you!’ He bit out. “You don’t understand how frustrating it is to have everything slip out of your control.”

“Oh, don’t condescend to me!” she snapped. “I know exactly how frustrating it is! Come talk to me about things being out of control after you’ve dealt with multiple assassination attempts and rescue missions and battles breaking out while you’re trying to help people all at once, you sheltered, arrogant little manchild!”

Anakin's eyes narrowed, anger bubbling inside of him for *many* reasons. "First you assault me, now you're insulting me?" He snapped. "I honestly am coming to regret the day I went to the Senate to hear your martyr instincts speak! If I had known you would ruin my life, I would have stayed in my *sheltered* life! *Alone*."

"I ruined your life?" She grabbed him by the collar, dragging him into the hotel room. The door slammed behind them. "Why don't you accept some kriffing responsibility for your own actions! You made just as many choices as I did that put us on this path, this is not any one person's fault, and maybe it's time you started to realize that!"

"Coming here was a mistake," he scowled, adjusting his robes. "I am not going to stand here and keep fighting for this worthless cause."

"And what worthless cause is that?" she demanded. "Because I think you made it very clear that you *don't* love me, no matter what impressions Amee might have had. And I think I see now that you never did, just the illusion of what I was when you were nine years old, some beautiful, unapproachable... *angel*! Well, I'm not an angel, I am a person, and I have flaws, and if you can't handle them, you never deserved me to begin with!"

"You were the one who left me at the first sign of trouble," he shouted. "You left. No goodbye, no explanation, nothing! You left and I was the one to chase after you. But you broke me. You broke my heart and the truth is, I was never the same person again. My best friend preferred to stay at your side than mine, my mother all but became an alcoholic because of regret and the one person I trusted to stand at my side is now gone because I can't kriffing forget you. Or stop loving you."

"You gave up just as much as I did!" she argued. "You could have tried harder, you could have fought for me, and instead, you walked away and moved on to whatever woman suited your whims!"

"What? You wanted me to wait eternally for you to choose me? Duty will always come first to you. I'm sorry if I didn't crawl at your feet, begging you to come back to me. Is that how you like men? On their knees?"

"Is that how you liked Amee?" she demanded scathingly.

Anakin hissed. "Amee never had to beg or crawl. She still is a dear friend of mine and we've known each other forever. We were equals and she *put me first*."

"I meant when you slept with her," Padmé corrected.

"I never slept with Amee. We were waiting for the wedding night. I was not going to make the same mistake twice."

"Glad to know that's how you think of me," Padmé scowled. "I should get that on my grave. *Here lies Padmé Nabberrie Amidala, Anakin Skywalker's Mistake*."

"You know kriffing well that was not what I meant!" he hisses through his teeth. 'We rushed into sleeping together, didn't we? I didn't want to do the same to Amee.' he pauses to breathe, the shouting match taking its toll. "I'm leaving, this is not getting anyone anywhere. I already said what I had meant to." As he headed for the door, he found it blocked by the astromech. "Tell him to get out of there."

“Artoo doesn’t take orders well.”

“I’ll remove him myself.” Artoo whistled, offended. ‘Kriff, why did I listen to Kitster?’ He grumbled to himself trying to open the door but being pushed back by Artoo. “I think he has a problem with his circuits.” Anakin scowled.

“You want to fix him, be my guest.”

“He’s *your* problem. I just want to *leave*.” Anakin dropped down on the couch and glared at Artoo. *Feisty little droid.*

“Give him an hour, he’ll tire down,” Padmé said as she started rewinding the procedural. “Use my fresher, use my bed, use whatever you want in here, I honestly... I can’t care anymore. It’s too exhausting.”

Anakin huffed and remained on the same spot, arms crossed over his chest. “I’m fine just like this.” He focused on the droid and began gathering the Force. ‘What is it going to be, buddy?’ It was a comical stare off between the Prince and the astromech. The droid extended his arm, letting the electricity spark off it threateningly. Anakin narrowed his eyes and the Force began to lift the astromech. “How’s that?”

Artoo fired up the two little rockets on the sides of his legs and blasted straight at Anakin, knocking him into Padmé yet again. “I don’t like him,” Anakin complained with a little groan.

“I changed my mind, you can keep him.”

“All yours,” he snorted and gently propped himself up, supporting his weight on his hands as not to crush her. “But at least the door is clear.”

Padmé’s eyes flickered from the door to him. “So, this really is our final goodbye. You love me, and I love you, and yet, we’ve ruined any chance of ever being together.”

Anakin nodded slowly. “Apparently, yes. I’m going to leave. It’s... the right thing.”

“Or...”

“Or what?” He prompted softly.

“Or we could... just one last time.”

He didn’t need to be told twice as he leaned down and silenced her by capturing his lips in a desperate, borderline aggressive kiss. Her shoulders dropped forward, letting her robe fall to the ground and reveal the flimsi-thin white nightgown beneath as she leaned into him. He grabbed a fistful of the material and ripped it apart, letting the ruined nightgown fall away to the floor. She grabbed his belt and snapped it open, yanking his pants out of the way to grab his cock. He hissed and grabbed her ass tightly, pushing her down on the couch to lay on top of her, working to get rid of his boots and pants.

“First and only,” she whispered just before her tongue slid into his mouth. Anakin moaned into her kiss, hands moving up and down her delicate body.

“First and only,” he repeated as he pulled away breathlessly and slid inside of her unannounced, groaning as her body gripped him tight. “First and only,” Anakin whispered

again, claiming her lips once more.

Padmé moaned at the sudden, unprepared penetration, her nails biting into his flesh as she clutched his arms and started rocking her hips, bringing him deeper inside her. “Ani...”

Anakin moaned and kissed her, thrusting into her slowly. Even if they had almost ripped each other apart, he knew there was never going to be a more amazing feeling than being inside of her or hearing her moan his name. “*Padmé...*” He latched his lips to her neck and sucked on her pulse point, before leaving several love bites down the pale column of her throat. *Mine. She’s all mine.*

“Ani, I’m close,” she gasped into his ear. “I’m so close, love...”

“Not yet,” he whispered in her ear as he slowed his movements, dragging both of their releases. ‘I love you, Angel, no matter what,’ Anakin confessed as he kissed her cheeks and then her lips, using his tongue to explore every corner of her mouth. “You’re all mine,” he added as he broke off the kiss.

“From the moment we met,” she admitted, her legs wrapping around his as she reached up to touch his face. “It was always you.”

He gave her a small smile before picking up his pace again. “Then come for me,” he huskily said, leaving a trail of hot, wet kisses down her chest.

She clenched and went slack as her release flooded forth, a tidal wave of pure bliss. “You don’t know,” she gasped, “what you do to me.”

Anakin groaned as his orgasm hit next and rode the waves of pleasure, rocking his hips against her, until he covered her body with his. “I think I have an idea,” he said breathlessly. “Bed?” He mumbled, kissing her naked shoulder.

“Bed,” she agreed. “Now.”

They woke to the sound of the chrono on the bedside table blasting a very loud alarm. “Kill it,” Padmé groaned as she sat up. “Kill it with fire.”

Anakin just tightened his arm around her and the chrono snapped. “Mmm, sorry, no fire, only had the Force.” He mumbled sleepily.

“That’ll do,” she agreed softly, lying back down beside him. “Hi.”

He lazily opened his eyes. “Hi.” He brought her closer to him and nuzzled her neck. ‘First and only,’ he whispered, seemingly being reminded of something. “You don’t know how happy that makes me.”

“Hmm?” Padmé tilted her head drowsily.

“You and Palo... I thought things had been more intimate,” he admitted with a small shrug.

“I spent as little time with him as possible and we always slept in different buildings,” Padmé pointed out. “He was... very proper.”

“You dated for a while. I couldn’t hold it against you.” Anakin admitted. ‘But I’m happy you’re just mine,’ he smiled and kissed her cheek sweetly. “You know what you said last night, that we had ruined every chance at being together?”

“I think so, but then again, you ate me out so well that I think I forgot half of the year I was eight. So, my memory’s a little fuzzy right now, I’ll take your word for it,” she teased

. “What can I say?” He smirked and pecked her lips. ‘You taste heavenly and I was hungry.’ Anakin brought a hand to her face and caressed her cheek. “We didn’t ruin every chance. I think we deserve a real opportunity of making each other happy.”

“I can’t exactly argue with my future Emperor,” she replied. “Especially when he’s also the love of my life. But it’s not going to be simple, is it? People will gossip, say I seduced you away from Amee, wonder if I’m pregnant...” the blood drained from her cheeks. “For all we know, I could be. We weren’t exactly careful last night.”

“I know and trust me, I have thought of everything. We never had the time to know each other properly. What we did have was short, intense and maddening. I think that, for this to work out, we need to do things slowly, properly. Have a normal relationship. Go on dates. Known the little details about each other.” At the realization, he narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t there the morning after pill you can take?”

“Right, right,” she nodded hazily. “Um... We were going to take it slow originally, weren’t we? What was that plan again?”

“Hmm, if I remember correctly, the plan was that we would take a year to travel. You for your Crusade. Me for the beginning of my reign. We would get more time just for us before we had to share our relationship with the public. It was a good plan.” He kissed up and down her shoulder.

“Okay, so how about this.” She turned around and found the button that turned on the lights. “I will go back to Naboo like I was supposed to. I will finish finding someone to take my place at Amidala’s Crusade, get everything in order, look for an apartment here on Imperial Center, and officially move there after your coronation. That way you can focus on preparing to take the throne without me making things more complicated.”

“You don’t make things more complicated. Having you by my side is everything I want. But I do understand about Amidala’s Crusade and the apartment. Slow means distance, but the selfish part of me wants you at arm’s length so I know you’re there,” Anakin confessed.

“I’ll come back,” she reminded him. “After you’ve taken the throne. *Then* we can see about getting to date properly. And until then, you can comm me every night.”

“You’re abandoning me until my coronation?” He teased.

“Maybe I’ll come back sooner if I have a reason. But it’s hard to find a good apartment, especially in the nicer districts.”

“If you have a reason? What am I? Chopped liver?” Anakin raised his eyebrows. “I can help you search for an apartment.”

“Teasing, darling.” She kissed his knuckles. He pouted but his eyes were amused. “Of course you’re a reason, but the whole point of me staying away until after the coronation was

so that the press can't try to make a scandal."

"I know, but we can sneak you inside the Palace to be with me. We'll see about finding a temporary accommodation. I'm sure Kitster has contacts we can use."

"We'll figure it out," Padmé promised. "We don't need to solve everything right this second."

"As long as you don't try to desert me again."

"You have my word."

His smile turned mischievous. "I'm going to need something more."

"Like what?" She quirked an eyebrow.

Anakin leaned forward and brushed his lips over her neck. "I don't know, you have to be creative."

"Hmm. Do you have a knife?"

"No, why do you even want one?" He snorted.

"I'd rather not try to cut my hair with a lightsaber."

He gaped at her. "You're not cutting your hair. I love it like that."

"Ani, it's just one strand," Padmé said reassuringly. "It's an old Naboo ritual."

"I was really talking about you giving me a blowjob, but a ritual works," Anakin quipped. "What does it mean?"

Padmé rolled her eyes and carefully reached to the nape of her neck, plucking strands of hair one at a time until she had a solid-looking strand that she started twisting around itself. "In ancient times, when lovers parted, they would cut a piece of their hair and tie it in the lovers' knot for their partner to carry with them. So they would never truly be apart."

"Naboo has the most romantic traditions," Anakin smiled. "How long until you leave?"

"It was supposed to be in a few hours," she admitted as she pressed the finished knot into his hand. "But I didn't account for you showing up, or us... well.... Doing any of this."

"Are you able to stay with me for the rest of the day? And can we officially agree that... we're it? No more engagements, no other women or men. You and I. The two of us. *No matter what.*" Anakin grabbed her by the waist and pulled her on top of him.

"I'd have to charter a new ship," she said, pretending to think about it. "And I don't know if I can get my deposit on the first one back, but then again, you're very cute. And most definitely *it.*"

"I can make you forget about the ship and the deposit," he said smugly. 'I am apparently very good at that,' he quipped. "I'll have a new ship take you home, free of charge. As long as you stay with me the rest of the day."

"I could negotiate for eight hours." She winked, letting him know it was a game.

"I am *very* persuasive, Lady Naberrie," Anakin flipped them and got on top of her, beginning to teasingly kiss down the pale column of her throat that was marked with a few hickeys from their previous night. "I think I can do a better deal than *eight* miserable hours."

"Fine, you can have ten." She yawned, feigning boredom. "Not a minute more. Or will you try to persuade me more effectively?"

"I will certainly try," he bit her collarbone before moving lower. "Maybe going *lower* will help our negotiations?" His tongue dipped into her navel. Padmé squealed.

"Not there, I'm horribly ticklish!"

Anakin chuckled and looked up at her under his lashes. "Oh, really?" He grinned and licked her skin near her navel again.

"Aniiiiiii, no!" Padmé gasped, vibrations of laughter clashing with arousal. "You win, I'll stay!"

He laughed against her stomach as he moved up to kiss her on the lips. "I do enjoy winning," he grinned from ear to ear. "How should we enjoy the rest of our day together, Lady Naberrie?"

"Well, there is a very large bathtub in my fresher," she said, "and we are both very messy."

"What if we got *messier* and *then* try your very large bathtub?" Anakin wiggled his eyebrows.

"You are so bad!" she laughed, hitting him with a pillow. "Okay, we'll order room service, eat the food off each other and *then* try out the tub."

He grabbed the pillow and kissed her until they were both breathless. He has lost count of how many kisses they have shared in the past night, but he would never take it for granted again. "It's a date, Angel."

"Mmm, perfect."

11. Coronation Day

“You look very handsome.”

Anakin smiled at his mother through the mirror. “I hope so. I wouldn’t want my first portrait as Emperor to look bad. I would have to look at it for the rest of my days and think ‘what was I thinking?’” He joked even if the butterflies of the day he had ahead of him were already turning his insides into mush.

“Well, I am proud of you, no matter how your portrait turns out.” Shmi moved over to straighten his collar. “I think there’s a planet unrepresented here today. I’ve been greeting delegates all day.”

“Who’s missing?” Anakin questioned. “By the way, you look stunning as well, Mom. Sad that your Regency has come to an end, finally, after 21 years?”

“In a way.” She started fixing his hair. “I’m sad that my baby doesn’t need me anymore.”

“I will always need you, no matter what. I’ll need you now more than ever because even if I have been learning since I could speak, I have no idea what is it truly like to be Emperor.” Anakin said softly. “Besides, who would fix my hair and clothes and give ultimatums to my romantic interests?”

Shmi sighed. “I suppose I deserve that.”

“We will never let you forget it ever happened,” he said sweetly.

“We?” Shmi repeated. “I thought you were done with romance, you haven’t mentioned any new woman. Or are you practicing the royal we?”

Anakin licked his lips and just faced her silent for a minute. “As a way to show you I’m forgiving you for what you have done, I’m going to let you be a part of a little secret.” He said. “Padmé and I have started seeing each other again. She has been off-world the past few months, but we have been in constant contact with each other and she will be here today.”

Shmi blinked. Multiple times. “Is this a joke?”

“No. Apparently you’ll have grandchildren after all. My punishment for you at my earliest stages of rage was to leave you without those chubby babies you want so much.” Anakin teased her. “If I were you, I would be careful, since Padmé is not in the same forgiving mood as I am.”

“I don’t... you... Ani...”

“I thought you wanted to get me back together with Padmé. Did I break you?”

“I think I might faint.”

“Please don’t, you’ll delay the entire ceremony.”

"You can do it without me. I just... I can't believe it," Shmi admitted, hugging him very tightly.

"Happy for me or happy that your mistake a year ago did not leave you without a grandchild to spoil?" Anakin joked as he hugged her back. "I love her and she's the one. We just want to take it slow because the way Amee and I ended things is still fresh on people's minds. We don't want the Galaxy to start thinking Padmé is a homewrecker or something like that."

"Of course, of course, I won't say a word." Shmi smiled. "I'm going to go handle some things so that you can just focus on your own obligations. Oh, and someone else wants to see you."

"Who?" He frowned.

Shmi just smiled and kissed his cheek before heading out the door, passing two very familiar looking people on her way. "You look well," Obi-Wan Kenobi said with a smile.

Anakin laughed, surprise and happiness mixing with each other and clearly visible in his eyes. "Oh, if it isn't my mentor and my runaway bride." He teased both of them as he ushered them in. "I had no idea you two would come today, but I am glad you did!"

"Who else did you think would represent Mandalore?" Satine asked, smiling warmly. "Besides, we wanted to ask you something."

"Ah, I don't think your hand in marriage is available still, Duchess," Anakin joked.

"No, no, it's for our son," Obi-Wan corrected, placing a hand on Satine's stomach.

"You're expecting?" The soon-to-be Emperor asked excitedly. 'I am so happy for the both of you!' He hugged Satine before patting Obi-Wan on the back. "Ask me anything. What can I do?"

"We were hoping, in the event that he turns out to be Force-sensitive, you might be willing to train him," Obi-Wan explained. "Seeing as I am not exactly popular with the Order right now."

"The Order's loss is my gain and I will be honored, Obi-Wan, if, in turn, when I have a son, you train him."

"So a Skywalker will be the death of me yet," Obi-Wan chuckled, pulling Anakin in for a hug. "We have a deal."

Anakin patted his mentor's back with a huge grin growing on his face. "I have missed you, Obi-Wan. I could have used your advice this past year. But I didn't die or turn to the Dark Side, so it's a win-win situation."

"Well, I didn't want to give you further trouble with the press, considering you were planning your wedding. Though, I suppose I should have been here when you had yet another runaway bride."

"I was happy Amee had the courage I didn't." Anakin sighed, running a hand through his hair, messing up his curls.

"I feel like there are pieces of information we're missing," Satine said. "We've been very busy on Mandalore."

"I bet," Anakin smirked. "How is our *Duke* handling his new political title and responsibilities?"

"Lord Consort," Obi-Wan corrected. "The clans refused to recognize an off-worlder as Duke. There was quite a lot of arguing and politics, it was quite exhausting and unpleasant."

"Lord Consort... it's not bad. Your son will become a Duke, though, the clans can't go against that and if they do, your best friend is kind of the Emperor so..." Anakin shrugged with a little smile.

"You are not using the Death Star in my system," Satine warned.

"I was not going to *fire* it. Just look threatening," Anakin argued.

"No."

"She already has the mom voice all figured out," he narrowed his eyes. "Fine, no Death Star. But will you two allow me to introduce you to someone today? It's very important."

"Assuming you have the time in between meeting your subjects," Obi-Wan said with a smile. "I promise. Satine, do you mind giving us a moment alone?"

"Of course, dear," Satine said and leaned forward, kissing Anakin's cheek. "Good luck, your majesty."

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" Obi-Wan teased.

"If that was my goal, I would have married him last year," Satine rolled her eyes and Anakin snickered. "Don't delay him, Ben. I'll wait for you outside. I'll see if I find Shmi, actually."

"Yes, dear," Satine smiled at him and left the office, leaving both mentor and student alone.

"I would like to think that Qui-Gon would be proud of us," Obi-Wan said.

"Me too. We've come a long way and neither of us has any regrets. Sort of, but you know what I mean," Anakin agreed.

"For a long time, I thought you were the closest thing I would ever have to a son. And even though that is not the case, *I* am very proud of you too," the former Jedi added.

Anakin blushed a light pink and ducked his head. "Thank you."

"Do you want to tell me what happened, or should I just wait?"

"Padmé," Anakin said, as if one word, one name, explained everything. "She turns my world upside down and I really don't mind. This time, though, we're doing it the right way."

"Really?" Obi-Wan quirked an eyebrow, a small smile on his lips. "Well, I can't say I'm entirely shocked."

“Marrying Ameer would have been my biggest regret. I would have made her miserable. Fortunately, Ameer was smarter. She left and I’m grateful because she pushed me in the right direction.”

“I hope you’ll have me on the list for your wedding. Or are you planning an elopement?”

“The first time we tried to elope, it was a disaster. We’ll do things the right way this time. We’ll take our time. We are in no rush.” Anakin explained. “You and Kitster will have to share the best man title. He’s going to be a father soon, like you.”

“I will try not to be too jealous.” Obi-Wan teased, fixing Anakin’s hair back into place with the Force. “I hope that this works out as well as you seem to have it planned, Anakin. You deserve this kind of happiness. Truly.”

“I’m going to try my best, Obi-Wan, all I want now is to be happy with the woman that I love. And Force willing, I’ll do just that. I’ll officially introduce you both later at the celebration. I like to think you will get along.” Anakin said. “Also, I can’t forget to thank you for bringing me all the way here. You were my mentor, Obi-Wan, and many times, my father figure. Your son lucked out.”

“As will yours.” Obi-Wan smiled. “But I will warn you now, I reserve the right to stop teaching your children if they disrespect me.”

“Why begin when it will be my DNA and you know how that goes,” Anakin sighs dramatically.

“I’m hoping Lady Naberrie’s side will temper it,” Obi-Wan joked with a smirk. “But who knows, I might be wrong. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Yes, one thing at a time. Right now, I have to be crowned as Emperor.”

“Force help us all.”

“I was raised for twenty years for this, *Lord Consort*. Now, accompany me outside? Let’s find your wife and my mother. It’s time.”

“Very well, *your majesty*.”

“Excuse me, your majesty?”

He had been waiting to hear her voice since he spotted during the coronation, but it has been impossible to be with her without being too obvious. Anakin turned around, slowly, and excused himself from his conversation with the Corellian Ambassador. “Lady Naberrie, what a pleasant surprise.”

She grinned, smoothing down the bronze skirts of her gowns. “It’s a pleasure to see you again. If you’re free, would you be willing to join me for the next dance?”

“I already owe a couple of dances to a few ladies of the Court,” he said with a sigh, feigning being thoughtful. “How unfair will it be for them?”

"I suppose you're right," Padmé said, shrugging. "There are other gentlemen I could easily ask."

Anakin nodded but smirked knowingly. "You could, but they are not going to be the Emperor or the love of your life."

"True," she admitted with a smirk of her own. "But what else am I supposed to do while you fulfill your obligation to those other ladies?"

"If you keep me busy all night, I won't have to dance with other women. Except for my mom but I have a feeling she will gladly share me with you, given that she's your biggest fan at the moment," Anakin laughed.

"I think your mother has had more than enough time to have you to herself, your majesty," Padmé said pointedly.

"You are right, my future wife shouldn't have to share me at all," he chuckled and extended his hand. "Shall we, Lady Naberrie? Before someone comes and whisks you or me away."

"It would be my honor," Padmé said, curtsying for him before she took his hand. "But it's Senator Amidala, actually. The Queen asked me to serve until she could find a replacement. And I couldn't say no, not when it was my fault the last one quit."

"Senator Amidala. It has a nice ring to it. I'm sorry Palo hasn't forgiven you." Anakin said with a small sigh. "Do you ever wonder the difference you could have made if you hadn't refused the position in the first place?"

"I don't know," she said, resting her other hand on his shoulder. "Do you think we would have ended up here if I had? I think I would have been more inclined to stay away from you if I'd been Senator when we met."

"I'm irresistible and you know it," he drawled out smugly. 'Also, the crown really looks good on my head.' Anakin winked at her. "It's heavy though." He twirled her, and her dress sparkled underneath the lights of the ballroom. "You look stunning, Angel."

"You're too sweet, your majesty." She blushed, leaning against him. "But a little arrogant too. I think I might have found you an insufferable spoiled brat. But... a cute one."

"Maybe later, *Senator*, you can wear the crown while I will be your subject." He suggested, whispering near her ear.

"You know if you give me that, I might take it as an abdication and begin a new Republic," Padmé teased him, reaching up and knocking the crown slightly askew. "I am a Naboo woman at heart."

"True, but no one will take you very seriously when you're naked," he winked.

"Anakin!" she gasped, her cheeks turning even brighter red. "You're unbelievable!"

"I have missed you. A lot, actually. Haven't you missed me?" Anakin teased with a huge grin, his hold on her waist tightening a little more.

"We were on the comms practically every day!"

"I know, but I miss *you*. Physically. Your perfume, your taste, holding you... I've missed all of that," he whispered, resisting the temptation of leaning down and kissing her.

"Ani, people are starting to stare," she whispered, looking down self-consciously.

Taking Padmé's cue, the song ended and Anakin reluctantly pulled away. "Alright. I would like to introduce you to someone. Come with me?" He offered her his arm.

"How can I refuse?" she managed to smile as she placed her hand in his elbow. "I like the accessory, by the way," she added, tapping his lapel where the lover's knot rested.

"Someone told it meant a great deal and I insist in keeping it close to my heart," as he approached the former Jedi Master and his wife, Anakin smiled. "Obi-Wan Kenobi, Duchess Satine, I would like to introduce you to Padmé Naberrie, the interim Senator of Naboo."

"It's so good to see you, Obi-Wan," Padmé said, hugging Obi-Wan without any formalities. "It's been too long, you look wonderful. And congratulations, Satine, you're glowing."

"Right, you knew each other," Anakin said dryly. 'Let me introduce you another way.' The Emperor tugged the recently appointed Senator back, next to him. "Obi-Wan Kenobi, Duchess Satine, I would like to introduce you to Padmé Naberrie. The love of my life."

"I have heard quite a lot about your exploits," Satine said with a smile. "I suppose we should also thank you. Without your... exploits, Anakin might never have pressured Ben to ask me to elope with him."

"Oh, well," Padmé stammered, blushing. "I mean, I guess... You're welcome? But we're trying not to think about that so much. But I'm glad that you two are happy."

"Yes, I never knew Obi-Wan was capable of smiling until I saw him with Satine," Anakin quipped and his former mentor gave him a look. "What matters now is that everyone is with whom they should have always been with."

"You should at least dance with someone else, Anakin," Obi-Wan said as he spied from the corner of his eyed, the HoloNet reporters focusing on the recently crowned Emperor and the new Senator of Naboo. "Rumors fly very fast in Imperial Center. As much as you would like to keep your relationship private for now, if you don't mingle with other women, that won't happen."

"Perhaps the Duchess should volunteer then," Padmé suggested wryly. "So the media can see there are no hard feelings there."

"Will you give me the honor, your majesty?" Satine teased and Anakin chuckled.

"Of course, Satine," he offered her his hand and Satine accepted. "I'll give you your wife back in a few minutes," he winked at Obi-Wan.

"If you don't, I'll steal your new bride," Obi-Wan teased and Padmé giggled.

"I'll see all of you later, I have some Senatorial mingling to do." As she started drifting into the crowd, she caught sight of the glittering crown that adorned the head of the Queen Mother. Frowning, Padmé looked around for someone else, anyone else to talk to.

“Padmé?” Shmi called out, her doe eyes set on who would definitely be her future daughter-in-law, and quickly glided over to the young woman’s side. “I apologize. Senator Amidala, I heard the news. Congratulations, it’s a suitable position. I wish I had pushed harder for you to accept the position all those years ago.” She chuckled, nervously.

Padmé’s face went very neutral and cold as stone. “Thank you, your highness,” she said coolly. “Though ideally, I would never have had the opportunity to take it.”

The former regent nodded, aware that Padmé’s reception to her wouldn’t be the warmest, given their past. “Anakin has told me about you two. I want you to believe me when I say I am very happy that you found your way back to each other and that I deeply regret the part I played in your separation.”

Padmé’s eyes flashed. “And do you regret what you did to Palo Jemabie?”

“It was unfortunate, but I was desperate at that point. Anakin would have married that Princess if I hadn’t done something.” Shmi smoothed down her red skirts.

“Unfortunate,” the Senator repeated slowly. “Listen to me very carefully right now, your highness. For Anakin’s sake, I will tolerate you. I will do my best to coexist with you. But I will not forgive you or trust you for a long time, and maybe not ever. And I know I am not blameless in this, I should have been honest with Palo from the beginning. But you had no right to interfere with my life the way you did simply for the sake of assuaging your own guilt.”

“I know. I understand it completely. I will do my best to make you feel welcomed into our family. My actions were not the best ones, but I always had my son’s interest at heart and had I believed in his happiness with the Princess, you wouldn’t have had to deal with me again. But from the moment I realized Anakin considered Amee his Consort, and never his Empress like he had told me a year ago, I knew I couldn’t let him marry her,” Shmi explained.

“That doesn’t change anything,” Padmé said firmly. “And I think I should go socialize with my new colleagues now.”

“Padmé, wait...”

“There is nothing you can say to me right now,” the younger woman interrupted, “that can possibly improve my opinion of you.”

Shmi frowned and remained rooted to her spot. Anakin was right when he said Padmé would not be forgiving of her actions. As she saw the new Senator put some distance between them, Shmi sighed and turned around, bumping into someone. “Oh. Stars, I didn’t see you!”

“Evidently.” The blond man put a hand on her waist to steady her, smiling kindly. “Are you alright, milady?”

For the first time in forever, Shmi was speechless as she looked up at the man’s intense blue eyes. “I... I... yes, yes I am...” she cleared her throat, suddenly very dry as she became very aware of his hand touching her. “I apologize for spilling your drink.”

“I can get another one,” he said, still smiling. “Cliegg Lars of Tatooine. My family and I came with Senator Amidala.”

“Very nice to meet you, my lord,” Shmi smiled shyly. ‘I am the mother of the new Emperor,’ she turned slightly, to spy her beaming son, dancing with the Duchess of Mandalore. “The former Empress Regent. But those are details.” She waved one hand, feeling her cheeks burn as she cleared her throat and tried not to feel like a schoolgirl. “Shmi Skywalker.”

“Not a Lord, just a moisture farmer,” Cliegg corrected. “Though I suppose that could change soon if Padmé’s ideas work the way she’s told us they will. Most on Tatooine were skeptical, but I thought there was nothing to lose by trying.”

“Oh, why don’t you get me a drink as well and tell me about what ideas are those? I might be able to help the new Senator implementing them.”

“It would be my pleasure, your highness. And thank you for the offer.”

As Cliegg and Shmi drifted towards one of the serving droids, Padmé watched them, sipping from her own drink with a little smile. Was it hypocritical of her to have brought the Lars family in the hopes of distracting Shmi for the evening? Perhaps a little, but she intended to keep her word and advocate for Tatooine to be fully included in the Empire. Really, it was killing two nexuses with one blaster shot.

“And what are you up to, Senator Amidala?” Bail Organa inquired. “You almost look smug.”

“Just a little inside joke,” Padmé answered breezily. “Tomorrow is going to be very interesting.”

“How so?” Bail raised his eyebrows, amused. ‘You know what, Padmé, I’ll wait to see for myself. I’m sure I will enjoy it. I do have to congratulate you on your newly appointed position. It’s going to be good having you in the Senate.’ The Senator of Alderaan sipped on his own wine. “What do you think of our new Emperor?”

“I think he has the potential to be exceptional, provided he keeps the right company,” Padmé replied nonchalantly. “Though Force knows some will try to take advantage of his inexperience. I pity them.”

“He seems a lot smarter than people give him credit for and I don’t think anyone will cross him. Especially with the mother he has. No one will be that stupid.”

“I don’t know, Bail, I’ve heard whispers. Some people are hoping the son will take more after the father, now that he has the full authority.”

“His father was a tyrant, Padmé, let’s hope he doesn’t get to that point,” Bail sighed. “But he is Force-sensitive and trained by the Jedi. Which is a useful tool when you need to protect your Empire. The Senate has been wary, with all these broken engagements of his. They’re afraid he’ll be unstable.”

“Strictly speaking, *he* was never the one to break off the engagements,” Padmé pointed out defensively. “They’re overthinking it. You of all people should know the pressures that come from having one’s personal life be made so public.”

Bail smiled slightly as he sipped on his drink. “You’re very defensive of our Emperor, Padmé,” he observed. “But you’re right. People shouldn’t be so quick to judge him from what

the HoloNet reports. He's building his own Private Council, has he told you that?"

"No, I heard about that from Kitster Banai. Apparently, his father will be stepping down as Supreme Commander, rather than joining the Council. Retiring to spend time with his grandchild, apparently."

"Many of the Senate members are expecting to be chosen to provide the young Emperor with advice," Bail said, nodding. "Rakir has been radiant with the news and he has been saying that he'll do with his grandchild all he didn't get to do with Kitster because of his job."

"I'm sure he'll enjoy it. And I hope I can count on your support when I bring my first bill to the Senate floor?"

"I trust you, Padmé, and I'll support you. I'll even speak with my colleagues so they don't give you too much trouble," Bail chuckled. "Breha misses you. You should come to Alderaan sometime."

"I'll see what I can do. I've been busy."

"Amidala's Crusade. I've heard."

"It's been hard to let it go. But some things are more important." Padmé's eyes drifted to Anakin briefly. "And it was extremely arrogant of me to think I could fix everything in the galaxy on my own."

"Haven't we told you that several times?" He smiled at her softly. "I'm happy to have you on the Senate, Padmé and I hope it's not just temporary. I'm sure Queen Jamillia knows your value to Naboo."

"Well, let's see if I can handle it for the interim before making any big commitments," she laughed, smoothing down the sparkling bronze fabric of her skirt despite the fact that it left flecks of glitter on her palms. "I haven't even started yet."

Someone cleared their throat behind both Senators and when they turned, they saw Anakin and his expression was blank.

"Your majesty," Bail bowed. "What a wonderful celebration."

"Thank you, Senator Organa," he said in a diplomatic voice. "May I have a word with Senator Amidala, please?"

Bail looked between his colleague and his Emperor and slowly nodded. "But of course, your majesty. Padmé, I'll see you around." He flashed his old friend a small smile, before leaving the two alone.

"You two are very friendly," Anakin said in a clipped voice.

"Yes, and he's very married," Padmé replied calmly. "Would you have preferred finding me dancing with someone? Him, for example?" She pointed to a dark-haired senator with yellow tattoos on his forehead.

Anakin rolled his eyes. "Rush Clovis is so beneath you," he huffed. "And I didn't say *anything*," he muttered.

“Of course not,” Padmé smiled. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of bringing a friend for your mother.”

“Huh?” Anakin said, confused until he spotted his mom speaking with a blonde man he had never seen before. “May I know who he is?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Cliegg Lars,” Padmé answered. “He’s a moisture farmer from Tatooine, he and his son were among the ones who helped me when I crashed there as Queen of Naboo. I invited him here because Naboo is sponsoring Tatooine’s bid to join the Empire.”

“I’ve heard about that. I found it interesting. Would this Cliegg be the Ambassador once the Empire accepts Tatooine?” Anakin questioned as he watched his mother laugh at something the other man said. “Did you really just play matchmaker with my mom?” He shook his head, amused.

“How do you know he’s not married?” Padmé said, feigning innocence. “As for whether or not he’d be Ambassador, I don’t know. Tatooine is still in a very developmental stage of its new governing system. And the Hutts are just waiting to get it back.”

“Because I know you and you look smug. You wanted them to meet.” Anakin chuckled. “The Hutts are a problem but if Tatooine enters the Empire, I’m sure we can help with some Imperial forces.”

“Fine, I admit it. I wanted to give her a taste of her own medicine. And make sure that she was distracted when she found out we were getting back together.” Padmé shrugged. “Can you blame me?”

“No, but I can steal you for a few minutes alone. Meet me in my office in five?” He asked, biting his lower lip.

“I suppose I can do that, your Majesty.” She curtsied again, winking at him as she rose. “I serve at your pleasure, after all.”

“I will see you in five minutes, Senator,” he said with a smirk and he sneakily left the ballroom and went towards his office. He had mingled. He had spoken with everyone he needed to. Anakin deserved some alone time with his girlfriend. They have been apart for too long.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. “I have a meeting with his Majesty?”

“Come in, Senator,” he said as he leaned back against his desk. The crown he still wore was leaning sideways on his head as he smirked at her. Padmé stepped inside, pulling a few of the pins out of her hair.

“How can I be of service?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

The doors closed behind her and locked themselves, no doubt Anakin using the Force. “I seem to remember, Senator, that you’ve promised a very, very pleasing reunion in one of our talks.”

“Politicians don’t always keep their word,” she countered with a little smirk. “Not unless they’re getting something in return. So what do you have to offer me?”

“It’s better if I show you,” he replied. “Words are not enough.”

"I couldn't agree more," she said, closing the distance between them and kissing him deeply. His arms came around her waist, wrapping her in a tight hug as he kissed her back with as much passion as he could find. "Ani... Force, Ani, I missed you," Padmé gasped.

"You've been gone for too long," he whispered against her lips. "You're not leaving again. Nope. I will die if you leave again," and he kissed her again.

"I think you might be exaggerating a little bit, sweetheart."

"I'm not, actually," he smiled as he kept her in a tight hold. "Have I told you I found you a perfect place to live?"

"You mean besides the Senatorial apartments I'm currently occupying?" she asked, running a hand along his jaw. "They're pretty comfortable."

"The Palace has guest apartments and they are usually used by privileged guests at Imperial Central. You're a privileged guest. It would be easier for us to be together without being hounded by the HoloNet reporters," Anakin countered, beaming at his solution.

Padmé hesitated, tilting her head as she thought about it. "It could work, I just... worry. People are looking for chinks in your armor, I don't want them to use me as one. Maybe if we had another excuse?"

"Everyone will always be looking for excuses to tear me down or undermine me. I know many are not happy about having a twenty-one-year-old kid on the throne and I will have to always pay attention to every single detail. One thing I will definitely not do is hurt our relationship or be away from you just because some old and wrinkly man says it's wrong," Anakin scowled.

"Sweetheart, calm down," she soothed. "We are not going to let anyone get in our way. This is just me wanting to take precautions against it. Amee hasn't said anything, but if Palo found out..." she swallowed. "He might want to start talking."

"He might be angry but would he humiliate you like that?" Anakin asked softly. "I... I know he loved you, Padmé, if he didn't, he wouldn't have been so hurt. I don't think he would do anything to hurt you."

"I don't want to take the risk, Ani." Padmé squeezed his hands. "But I think I might have an idea. Your council, who's on it?"

"My mother, of course. I've invited Kitster and Obi-Wan. I was going to ask you, but I was hoping to do it in a more intimate scenario. I want the people I trust close to me."

"Well, this is rather intimate, don't you think?" she pointed out, leaning into him a little more. "If we give it a few days for you to start hearings about the Tatooine project, then you invite me here, it could work."

"A few days?" He sighed exasperated and tightened his hold on her waist. "Haven't we been apart for too long? You want to add a few days to it?" Anakin was whining and he didn't care.

"Would this help?" She pulled away from him, sitting back on the desk and pulling up her skirts. "We have a little time right now, after all."

"I'm sure people will question why my clothes are filled with glitter, but I don't care," he said slyly as his hands found the smooth skin of her legs and began trailing upwards as he pulled her to the edge of the desk and in for a sensual kiss.

"That's for Threepio to worry about," Padmé teased, reaching down to start tugging at her underwear.

Anakin undid his belt and threw it to the ground as he chuckled and pulled her skirts away, giving her a helping hand with removing the flimsy piece of lace.

"I love you."

"I love you too. More than you'll ever know."

"Show me."

As he pulled her forward, her legs wrapped around his midsection and he kissed her hungrily as he, at the same time, tugged down his pants and freed his member to dive into her in a single thrust. He moaned at the contact, having dreamt about having her in his arms since she left for Naboo two months ago.

"Oh!" Padmé gasped, clinging to his shoulders as she adjusted her hips. "A little warning next time, love!"

"Sorry," he mumbled, lips at her neck. "I was a bit excited."

"I can tell. Just... slow down a little," she whispered, leaning into him a little more. "Let's make it last while we can. Before they realize we're gone."

Anakin pulled back to kiss her softly. "Agreed."

12. Adventures in Domesticity

"If I didn't know any better, Shmi, I'd think you were embarrassed by me," Cliegg asked, smiling at her from across the table. "Have I done something wrong?"

"I am not, Cliegg, you shouldn't think like that," Shmi sighed as she sipped on her wine. "Of course you haven't, darling, but we've spoken about this before. For now, our relationship has to remain a secret."

"I don't understand why, though. You've been a widow for a very long time, I don't think anyone would begrudge you starting something new," he pointed out. "Well, that Amedda fellow, maybe, but he's not exactly a good person."

"It's not just about me. My actions reflect on my son as well, Cliegg, and right now he's dealing with the attention of having his courtship of Padmé public. He doesn't need my love life talked around the HoloNet as well," Shmi sighed and reached forward to take Cliegg's hand. "But you shouldn't think my feelings are any less true."

"And it has nothing to do with the fact that you're worried Anakin will think you're abandoning him?"

Shmi tilted her head. "He's new to the throne and I want him to feel that he has my complete attention and dedication for whatever's necessary."

"Maybe what he needs is for you to let him be his own man. When he needs you, he will tell you."

"I can't believe you're getting angry at me, darling," Shmi whispered.

"I'm not angry, I'm... disappointed," Cliegg corrected. "I don't enjoy feeling like I'm coming in second in this relationship, Shmi. I care about you deeply, and I'd like to know that you're willing to put us first."

"Cliegg... my son has been my whole life for the past two decades and when I let go, I want to be sure he's safe and happy. There are many people unhappy with him taking charge and his relationship with Padmé is still not stable enough. I just want to make sure nothing can hurt him." Shmi defended. "You know I care about you as well. You know you have been the only man in a lifetime to make me..." she cleared her throat. "Make me feel like... like this."

"So can you please try to start putting us first a little more often?" he asked, squeezing her hand. "Anakin has Padmé to take care of him now. Let me take care of you."

Shmi smiled. It was the first time someone wanted to take care of her like that and Cliegg has brought a new fire to her life that she never knew she was missing. His request was reasonable. Unnecessary even. She should have realized that she was putting him in second place to her grown up son. "It's just hard for me, I'm sorry. Sometimes I don't even know that I do it. Anakin was my sole reason to live ever since he was born and I'm having a hard time

accepting... he doesn't need me anymore," she blinked away the moisture in her eyes and straightened her back. "I will put us first more, I promise."

"Thank you." He leaned in and kissed her cheek before wiping away the flecks of tears in the corner of her eyes. "Should we see about dessert now?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Perhaps we could see if there's an Opera show we could go one of these days?"

"I don't know if I'd understand it, I'm just a simple moisture farmer, after all. But if you want to, I'd be happy to try."

"You are much more than a simple moisture farmer, Cliegg. Don't sell yourself short, darling. I think you will love the Opera. If you don't..." she shrugged. "We don't have to go again," Shmi chuckled. "We'll find something that we both love to do together."

"I think I can agree on that."

Shmi smiled widely as their serving droid placed their desserts in front of them. "How's your son and his wife?"

"They're doing well, but Beru's a still little starstruck by the whole business here." Cliegg chuckled. "I think if I ever invited them to visit, she might faint."

"Well, when Anakin and Padmé get married, you need to invite them. Or even before. We... we do care about each other and maybe it would be a good idea that... in a near future we introduce our respective families to each other. Don't you agree?" Shmi blushed a light pink as she took a bit of her dessert.

"Probably before a large event. They're not exactly used to being in society like Imperial Center has."

"Of course, I understand. It can be a bit... much. Have they began speaking about building a family?"

Cliegg chuckled. "I think you might be projecting, darling. How much have you been thinking about Anakin and Padmé giving you grandchildren?"

"A little bit," Shmi said defensively, before chewing on her bottom lip for a few moments. "Fine. A lot. But how can you hold it against me? I thrive to have little children filling this Palace with the sound of laughter and squealing. Not that Anakin didn't make enough noise and messes for three kids on his own, but..." she laughed. "I miss having a little baby or a little toddler. Don't tell me you are not looking forward to your own grandchildren."

"I honestly don't know," Cliegg admitted. "Having children on Tatooine is a very different experience. It's a harsh world. Owen... he barely even had a childhood, I regret that I couldn't give him and his mother more."

"If you gave them love, you gave them enough, believe me," Shmi soothed him softly. "I've come to learn that nothing else is as powerful and as valuable as love. You can have a Palace and all the riches in the Galaxy and still be the most miserable being walking. But if you have love... there's not much else you need."

"I have not believed in love since Aika," Cliegg sighed, looking away. "Not until meeting you."

Shmi smiled. "And I haven't believed in love since Rusjay. Which was..." she sighed, "... a *lifetime* ago. I was basically a child. Truth to be told, the only real love I ever felt was a mother's love for her son and true love began to feel like a fairytale to me. Unreal. Which is why I was so horrible when Anakin and Padmé first got together," she made a face. "I am not proud of what I did."

"Rusjay?" Cliegg asked. "Well, that's a story that has me intrigued."

"It's not a very long story. Or with an interesting plot." Shmi said sadly. 'I fell in love with a servant and my parents did not allow that idea. We were on of the richest families in Bellassa. Being courted by someone inferior to our status was simply unthinkable.' She shook her head. "It was a forbidden love and it made it much more intense."

Cliegg gave a little sigh. "Well, Aika and I... it was something of a similar story. She was from Ator, ran away from her family and met me on Tatooine... There are times now when I think I was just the result of her rebelling against her parents. After we had Owen, she started getting... discontented. She went into Mos Eisley one day and never came back."

"I'm sorry," Shmi said. "Some women just don't know how lucky they are."

"I do hope she's happy... With whatever smuggler she ran off with. But I still can't believe that she would just abandon her son."

"You have to believe, like I do, you did everything in your power to be both mother and father to Owen. I was a single parent myself and I know Anakin deserved a father but... not the one he had and fortunately, Obi-Wan filled a couple of spaces for me when it was needed."

"What happened to your husband was a tragedy."

Shmi froze and as she finished her dessert, she cleaned her lips with her napkin and took a deep breath before looking up at Cliegg. He was... honestly, he was everything she had ever wanted in a man. Honest, hardworking, with integrity and he looked at her like she was something unique. Telling this man her darkest secret would destroy it all. "Were you a fan of my husband?" She asked quietly, coldly even.

"It really didn't make any difference to me. The Hutts remained in charge of Tatooine, we didn't even really notice who was in charge out here," he answered, frowning slightly. "Does it matter?"

"My husband was a monster," Shmi stated bluntly. "He was a Sith. The worst of the worst."

Cliegg blinked slowly, his blue eyes hiding whether or not he understood her meaning. "I'm sorry."

"Sith are... heartless and they only care about one thing. Power." Shmi gritted her teeth and before continuing, she took a sip of her wine. The confession that was going to slip from her lips was one she couldn't take back and the way Cliegg would deal with it would tell Shmi everything she needed to know about their future. She was honestly terrified. 'Oh and...

having an apprentice. So they can mentor and twist into their mindless, bloodlusting puppets,' she spat her eyes flashing. "When I was sold to the Emperor as a way of paying my family's debt, I had no idea what I was getting into. Everyone was jealous. I was going to be Empress," her smile was cold and icy. "I would have gladly lived under the scorching suns of Tatooine."

"Shmi, you're scaring me. Whatever dark is in your past, please, don't let it consume you like this..."

"When Anakin was born, do you know what the Emperor wanted to do?" Shmi closed her eyes and tried to get rid of the dark energy that attempted to consume her.

"Forget about that. He's gone now, and your son is a wonderful man who is going to do great things for this galaxy. As you did."

"Let me... let me finish," Shmi asked in a calm whisper. 'He wanted to raise Anakin as Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith. The most powerful Sith to ever exist. A monster.' Shmi swallowed down the lump in her throat. "And if my son is the wonderful man he is today it's because I did what every mother would have done..." she lifted her eyes to meet Cliegg's, "...I saved my son."

"Shmi... This is a lot to take in."

"I know," she smiled sadly. 'I know I'm not the perfect human being you imagined,' she laughed softly. "Whatever you need to do, I will not stop you."

"I think I need to take you home. You're clearly tired."

"No, I will have my escort take me to the Palace," Shmi shook her head and stood up, smoothing down her skirts. "I have given you a lot of information to process, Cliegg. But I ever wanted us to work, I needed to tell you the truth," she said with a faint smile.

"Shmi, I want to take you home. Just let me. Please."

"What I just told you can't be taken lightly," Shmi insisted. "I would rather go home alone tonight and let you think about this. About what I did and who I am. You were the first man I ever felt this connection and I needed you to know the truth." She leaned down and kissed his forehead.

"Shmi..." Cliegg grabbed her hand. "I would rather not be alone right now."

"Are you afraid of me?" She asked quietly, squeezing his hand.

"I'm still here. What do you think that means?" he pointed out with the faintest hint of a smile.

"That maybe running will be misunderstood by the troops outside," she teased with a little laugh. "You really still want to be with me?"

"Do you still want to be with me?" he countered.

"If I didn't, I wouldn't have trusted you with a secret that can destroy me."

"And I swear I will not betray that trust. No matter what happens next."

With that vow of his trust, Shmi leaned down and held his face between her hands as she kissed him, more in love than ever.

Padmé closed her Senate datapad and opened her ‘advisor to the Emperor’ one, shifting through the agenda for the next day’s meeting. With all the madness, it was almost impossible for her and Anakin to get any quality time alone. Which was probably why she was in a very skimpy negligee while she did her work, just in case he had the chance to see her. There was a knock at the door and she set the datapad aside, teasing up her hair. “You know it’s always open!”

“Thanks for the invitation,” Shmi grinned as she waltzed into the room and chuckled at the Senator’s figure. ‘My son is a lucky man, isn’t he?’ She quipped. “Although, I’m afraid he’s still in meetings.”

Padmé scowled as she pulled a blanket over herself. “What do you want? I was busy.”

“For how long will you hate me?” Shmi sighed as she sat in one of the armchairs. Her mood was too chirpy from being with Cliegg and not even her son’s girlfriend hatred for her would make it go away.

“How long did your meddling delay Anakin and me being together?” Padmé asked pointedly. “Because it’ll be at least that long.”

“I’ve apologized and tried to make amends! Doesn’t that count for something?” The former regent huffed. ‘Also, do you know if you moved into his quarters, having sex would be easier?’ She sighed as she twirled one curl around her finger and looked around. “I don’t see why are you still using a guest apartment. Especially since you are a public item already.”

“Because of this!” Padmé pointed out. “Anakin and I have an agreement. We decided to take this relationship slowly, at no one’s pace but our own. I am not interested in *anything* you have to say because listening to you never does anything but bring trouble!”

“I will never again try to separate you from my son and I know how happy you make him,” Shmi said defensively. ‘Yes, my actions were terrible and I admit that. I apologized! I will *not* keep doing so just to please you,’ she scowled. “We both live in this Palace and we will both remain in each other’s lives for a very long time, so why don’t we *try* to get along for Anakin’s sake?”

“I accepted your apology, that is not the same thing as forgiveness,” the younger woman pointed out. “And I’m not sure you’ve learned your lesson, considering that you are still trying to meddle in our personal lives!”

“Only because you two are usually stuck in an impasse. Look, do you really think Anakin prefers to have you here on the other side of the Palace? Or does he prefer to have you in his quarters, where he will always see after an exhaustive day like today as been?” Shmi argued.

“When Anakin is ready, he will ask me!” Padmé countered. “And that is strictly between the two of us, you *don’t* get a say in it. But so long as we’re on the subject of offering unwanted opinions and advice, do you think Cliegg Lars enjoys being hidden like you’re ashamed he’s courting you?”

Shmi narrowed her eyes. "I am not ashamed he's courting me. If anything, I am the one who is basically courting *him*. There is just too much going on in Imperial Center and I want to cherish our relationship while I can," she countered. "Anakin won't ask you because he will fear it's too fast. I know how he works and I also know that his trust issues came from my actions to you both. You two *keep* needing a *push*."

"*That is not your call to make!*" Padmé snapped, getting out of bed to push Shmi out of the room. "You are squandering your chance to be with someone wonderful because you are unable to stop micromanaging your son's life! Force, I caught Threepio in the middle of switching my contraceptives with fertility boosters! What is *wrong* with you?!"

"That incompetent droid," Shmi muttered under her breath. 'I want my son to have a family that I couldn't give to him and I would have spoken with you directly if you weren't so blasted convinced that I'm worse than a Sith,' she hissed. "I've tried to come to terms with you and find common ground. Yes, the way I broke you two off was wrong and I was horrible. I've faced the consequences of my actions for far longer than you imagine." Shmi scowled. "Don't think I am not aware that you planned my meeting with Cliegg. For which I am not mad. I'm grateful." She adjusted her dress. "Fortunately, you will not become a mother in the same conditions as me so you will not know the sacrifices and you will *never* know just what Anakin means to me. Goodnight, Senator." Shmi whirled around and nearly barreled into her son.

Anakin just stared from his mother to his girlfriend, an exasperated look on his face. He had been at the end of the hallway when he began hearing their shouts.

"Don't say a word, Ani, I am already leaving," Shmi muttered and brushed past him.

The Emperor followed her until she was out of sight and sighed, turning to Padmé. "What was it now?" He asked tiredly.

"She wants me to move into your rooms, have your babies, and forgive her. Not necessarily in that order," Padmé sighed, sinking down onto the bed. "I'd forgive her if she'd stop trying to meddle."

"I want you to move into my rooms and have my babies too, but I know she has a different way to approach the subject," he chuckled. "She's trying, Padmé, sharing me is uncharted territory for her and my mom only knows bold approaches. Subtlety is still... difficult for her."

"We've only been dating three months, much as I do want us to get married and have babies, I kind of like where we are now," Padmé admitted. "I mean... getting to be in a relationship."

"I know," Anakin sat next to her. "I like it too and we don't have to rush into anything. I'll warn her about meddling. Again."

"Mmm," Padmé moved aside her blanket, giving him a good look at the purple lace of her nightgown. "Maybe we don't talk about your mother anymore tonight and do something else?"

"Oh, much more interesting in fact," Anakin whispered as he placed a hand over her thigh and leaned over to kiss her, making her fall back on the bed as he covered her with his own

body. Padmé laughed warmly and pulled him closer, forgetting about Shmi for the time being.

It was near the end of a long, stressful day, when Anakin had to change clothes for dinner with Padmé, that he noticed something unusual in the wardrobe of his bedroom. And as he looked around, he noticed it was not only the wardrobe, but the bedroom itself was... different. It was not how he had left it that morning. But it was the wardrobe change that made him take a step back. Half of his wardrobe was now filled with dresses, headpieces and other feminine apparel that did not belong to him. It all belonged to Padmé.

"She wouldn't..." Anakin muttered under his breath, eyes narrowing. *Blast it, Mom.*

"She would," Padmé grumbled, emerging from the fresher. "Right down to my bath oils. That woman is thorough. I thought you talked to her."

Anakin winced and scratched the back of his head. "I haven't gotten that chance. There has been so much going that it slipped my mind but now I'll definitely speak with her. This went too far. Again. I'm sorry, Padmé, I'll help you move back to your guest apartment."

"She'll just move me back here at the first opportunity, Ani. Given the circumstances, I say we concede the battle in order to win the war."

"Not after I speak with her, she won't. My Mom doesn't know boundaries but I'll teach her some. I'm not going to let her manipulate our lives like this." Anakin stated. "We had an understanding and I'm going to respect it. It's late today, but we'll move you back tomorrow and I'll ban her from the guest apartments."

"Maybe what she needs is an actual baby to fuss over," Padmé muttered, folding her arms over her chest as she sank down on the bed. "I just... *ugh!*"

"We're not having a baby just for her to leave us alone. I'll be very firm with her and she'll back off."

"Who said we were the ones who had to have the baby?"

Anakin just gave her a look. "I'm not asking Kitster to borrow his child."

"Didn't say that either."

"Then I have no idea what you mean," Anakin shrugged. "Maybe we can find her a pet for her to spoil. I don't know but she will have to back off."

"It's too late to move me back tonight, but I see no reason not to go down to her room and give her a piece of our minds now," Padmé said, standing up defiantly.

"My mom, my problem. I'll go and speak with her. Just get dressed so we don't miss our dinner date." Anakin shook his head, tired of this whole game. He thought his Mom had learned her lesson.

"Any requests?" Padmé asked with a sultry wink.

"Surprise me, Angel," he answered with a sly grin as he left his bedroom to stalk down towards his mother's suite.

“Oh, Master Ani, I don’t recommend that,” Threepio fussed, trying to move in front of him.

“Get out of my way, Threepio,” Anakin scowled as she pushed the doors open without knocking.

“Anakin!” Shmi gasped, pulling up her covers to her chin. “Sweetheart, this isn’t a good time...”

Anakin’s eyes widened as his jaw dropped as he froze at the door. “Oh, *kriff*, no, that’s just...” he cringed and quickly turned around. “*Mom!*” He cried out indignantly. That was an image that he would unfortunately have burned into his brain for the rest of his life.

“I did try to warn you, Master Ani,” Threepio just stared at him from the other side of the door very nonchalant, like the Emperor hadn’t just walked into his mother having sex.

“Ani, please, I’m very sorry...”

“For what? Forcefully moving my girlfriend into my wing or for scarring me for life and probably ruining sex for me?” Anakin whined as he covered his eyes with his hand, even if he had his back to the bed.

“I... you found out about that?”

“How could I not? All of her stuff is in there?” Anakin scowled. “Are you decent? Or near decent? Is you *boyfriend*? Kriff, Mom, since when do you date?”

“Since the coronation. Did Padmé not tell you she brought him here to meet me?”

“From meeting you to... to... to *this*... it’s a big step,” Anakin argued. “Oh, Force, I’ll just wait in my office, I need a strong drink.” He basically ran away from the bedroom.

“Anakin!” Cliegg’s voice echoed from behind him.

The Emperor stopped and cringed. “Please, I would rather not do this after what I saw.”

“Anakin, I am sorry you had to find out this way, truly I am,” Cliegg insisted, “but please... just a few minutes.”

He sighed and slowly turning around. “I’m listening,” he said slowly, intrigued.

“I love your mother. And it does frustrate me that she feels this need to keep fussing over you, but she is worth it. I... I want to be able to court her properly, and to marry her. If it is alright with you, and if she says yes, obviously,” the older man said bluntly.

When Padmé had told him about Cliegg Lars, Anakin thought it would be a simple distraction for his mom but he never imagined this would come to pass. His mother kept meddling in his life so he thought Cliegg hadn’t been of her interest and she was back to her overbearing methods. “You love my mom,” he said slowly. ‘Uh.’ Funnily enough he was beginning to realize this man might become part of his family with this declaration. “How do I know it to be true? How do I know you’re not just after of what she represents?” It was *his* time to be protective.

A dark shadow passed over Cliegg’s face, and for a moment, there was just enough distress in his Force signature that Anakin heard his mother say ‘*I saved my son.*’ “What

would it take for you to believe me, Anakin? I know I can't offer her any of the fine things she's used to, that you have no reason to believe I won't betray her trust, but I also know that I don't want to live without her."

Anakin was impressed with Cliegg's fierceness and intrigued by that slip in the Force, something he would have to dig deeper, but later. "I don't mean to offend you, Cliegg, but while I do want my mother to be fussing over someone else other than me, it does not mean I'll just disregard her safety. You have been the only man I ever met that she's taken interest in and I want to make sure that she'll be happy and protected." He explained. "She deserves to have her own life. My Mom has taken care of me and lived for me for more than twenty years. She has a difficult temperament but she is the strongest woman I know."

"If I hurt her, I give you permission to run me through with a lightsaber."

He cracked a smile. "I hope it doesn't get to that. If you do hurt her, there are other torture methods I can use. Running you through with a lightsaber is simply not enough."

"Well, this is... frightening." Cliegg cleared his throat. "But I suppose I deserve it."

"If you never hurt her, you will never have to worry about it. You plan on formally courting her and having her hand in marriage then?" Anakin asked, a small, proud smile resting on his lips.

"If she wants me."

"You have my blessing. I feel it's just a formality, because the one that has to choose is my mother," Anakin said. 'All I want is for her to be happy.' He paused. "And for her to stop trying to increase my girlfriend's fertility and rearranging our living agreement behind our backs." Anakin added with an eye roll.

"I will do my best to help with that," Cliegg promised. "Though I do envy you... it'd be nice to have another chance at being a father properly. Do everything I didn't get to do with Owen because there was so much work to be done..."

"You'll both eventually have grandchildren."

"I know, but it's not quite the same." Cliegg sighed. "Anyway, you and Padmé go have a good time. It's your date night, isn't it?"

"Until it was ruined," Anakin made a face.

"It's only ruined if you let it be, Anakin."

"I don't think I'll be able to have sex tonight after what I just witnessed," Anakin snorted. "But I will take her to dinner and I'll leave you be to speak with my mother about your official intentions."

Cliegg laughed a little. "Again, I am very sorry."

"Just make sure to lock the doors," he kept making a face as he made his way to the bedroom, deciding to pass on the hard drink and just get right to dinner.

"Yes, sir, your majesty." The old moisture farmer winked.

“How can they talk for that long and not faint?” Padmé asked, burying her face in one of the throw pillows from the couch. “Why did I ever agree to take this job?”

“You’ll eventually get used to it. Didn’t you have some trick during your terms as Queen?” Anakin teased.

“None that work in the Senate!” Padmé groaned, falling backwards. “You’re going to make me run it when we’re married, aren’t you?”

“Yep!” Anakin didn’t even hesitate in the answer, popping the ‘p’ in the end and laughing afterwards.

“You’re a monster,” she complained, finally lowering the pillow.

“You love me,” he said in a sing-song voice.

“I know. What is wrong with me?” Before Anakin could respond, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me? Anakin? Are you available?” Cliegg’s voice came through the metal slightly warped.

Anakin exchanged a glance with Padmé. “Yes, Cliegg, I’m with Padmé but please come in.”

“Thank you.” As Cliegg stepped into the room, Padmé put her feet down on the ground as her eyes analyzed his face.

“What happened?” she asked in concern.

“Just like I had spoke with Anakin before, I talked with Shmi about my intentions of courting her and marrying her,” Cliegg explained, sounding beat.

“By your expression, I don’t imagine the happy date will be anytime soon?” Anakin frowned. “What did she say to you?”

“That she couldn’t dream of getting married before you,” Cliegg grumbled as he sat down. “I didn’t even get the chance to broach the subject properly or make my intentions clear.”

“Oh, of *course*,” Padmé huffed. “Why am I not surprised?”

“*Padmé*,” Anakin said in a tone to placate her before turning to the disappointed man. “Cliegg, I’m sorry my Mom is so headstrong. I will speak with her, but in an ambiguous way. I’ll take her to dinner, spend some quality time alone with her and be very open with her,” he explained. “Maybe when she realizes she doesn’t have to wait for me, or she’ll be waiting for a while, she’ll change her mind. I know she loves you and just like she thinks Padmé and I need a push every now and then, I think she needs one right now. This is her first serious relationship, I will just ask you to be a little patient.”

“I’d love to give her a push,” Padmé muttered to herself, picking at her nails bitterly. “Who does she think she is, lecturing *us* about our relationship when she’s this blind to her own!”

“Padmé, she’s my mother and she has never been in a relationship before,” Anakin said exasperated. “All she knows is how to be an overbearing mother and all her life she has put me first. It’s a hard habit to break. All she needs to understand is that she can put herself first

from now on and we are not going to accomplish that by barrelling in her office, screaming her ears off.”

“Not what I had in mind.” Padmé sulked into the fresher, closing the door behind her with more force than necessary.

“I’m getting tired of the feud between them. I hate that I have to choose sides,” Anakin scowled.

“I’ve tried my best to get her to release some of her grip, but I understand Padmé’s frustrations,” Cliegg sighed.

“It’s not like I don’t, but she has to understand we are speaking about my mother.” Anakin defended. “Cliegg, I’ll sort this out with her, ok? Just don’t give up on her just yet,” he smiled.

“I’m doing my best, Anakin. I just hope that she’ll be willing to open her mind to the possibility.”

“I know she is, she just needs someone to direct her into the right path for once.”

“It’d be cheating to ask for a Jedi mind trick, wouldn’t it?” Cliegg asked, looking ashamed. “And very bad form.”

Anakin shook his head. “I’ll let that one go due to grief,” he snorted. “Mental tricks are wrong. Besides, I don’t need them. She’ll listen to me.”

“I might also be a bit drunk right now. And that’s why my ideas are bad.”

“Come on, Cliegg, I’ll take you home,” Anakin sighed, giving the man a pat on the back.

“You’re a good son,” Cliegg mumbled. “Such a good son...”

“I try,” he chuckled as he helped the other man up.

13. Always a New Crisis to Solve

“Senator Amidala!”

“Your Majesty, over here!”

“Senator, you’re wearing a high-waisted gown tonight, should we be expecting any announcements in the future?”

“Stop me before I kill one of them,” Padmé muttered, gripping Anakin’s arm tighter.

“Easy. You are too stressed, love,” Anakin chuckled, covering her hand with his. ‘No announcements tonight, gentlemen,’ he replied dismissively. “Just trying to have a normal date outside the Palace.”

“You’ve been courting for months now, surely you two have been talking about the future at least a little!”

“No comment,” Padmé insisted firmly.

“We’re enjoying our relationship,” Anakin replied. “If you don’t let us pass, you won’t be invited when there is an announcement,” he threatened very naturally and a few reporters hesitated before clearing a path for the couple.

“Unbelievable,” Padmé sighed as they managed to make it to the opera box. “They’re almost as bad as your mother.”

“When are you going to stop hating on my mother? This is getting old and nerve wrecking,” Anakin sighed as he took his seat. “She has been backing off, hasn’t she?”

“Wait for it,” Padmé said, counting down on her fingers as Shmi and Cliegg entered the box.

“The press is certainly eager tonight,” the Queen mother remarked breezily, and Padmé’s fist clenched. “They won’t stop asking.”

“Yes, it’s awfully annoying, isn’t it?” Padmé muttered. “Almost like it’s highly inappropriate to be pushing people to move a relationship along at a pace other than their own.”

Anakin rolled his eyes and let his head fall in his hand.

“I have apologized,” Shmi replied as she sat down next to her son. “Haven’t I?”

“Yes. You said you were sorry.” Padmé stood up, arms folded over her chest. “And yet, you continue to meddle and exert unwanted pressure on our relationship. You use it like a bargaining chip because you’re still so fixated on the two of us, because you seem to think that’s how you make amends for your behavior, rather than just moving on and being patient! Fine, you want children, that’s not an unreasonable expectation, but you don’t *need* them right this second, and this man...” She pointed at Cliegg. “He deserves to be a priority. And with the way you’ve been behaving, he deserves far better than you.”

“Padmé!” Anakin said scandalized while his mother stood very still. ‘That was uncalled for,’ he whispered as he stood to stand between them, afraid of what his mother would do or say. “Mom...”

Shmi just raised one hand to stop him and she raised from her seat, her face betraying no emotion. “I’ll see you both at home. Cliegg, please stay. Enjoy the show, I heard it’s one of their best,” she said quietly and left the opera box. It had to be her fastest visit anywhere. She would leave through one of the backdoors, not wanting to give the HoloNet more material to hound them.

“Mom, wait!” Anakin called out. ‘Blast it. You really had to go all out on her like that, didn’t you?’ He scowled. “Come on, I asked you to be patient!”

“Anakin, I can’t keep doing this,” Padmé protested, tears starting to shine in her eyes. “I can’t keep dealing with this pressure from her, it’s driving me crazy that she can’t accept our decisions.”

“But she’s my *mother* and you *can’t* yell at her like that. Mistakes or not, she is still my only family and I said I would deal with it but this was completely uncalled for!” Anakin argued.

“I will go after her, Anakin,” Cliegg announced.

“No. Don’t. Do me a favor and if you don’t mind, accompany Padmé home. I’ll see if I can catch up with my mother and have a talk with her,” the Emperor asked.

“Ani... I’m sorry, I just...”

“You did enough,” Anakin cut her off as he left the Opera box, hoping to catch his mother before she left. “Mom!” He called out as he found her getting into the speeder.

“Ani, please, just let me go home...” Shmi sighed, avoiding his gaze as her clone escorts continued to keep the press away from her. “I’ve spoiled the evening enough as it is.”

“Tonight wasn’t your fault,” he said apologetic. “However, we are due to a mother and son evening, aren’t we? Let’s drop the Opera and go have dinner at Dex’s. I remember when you would take me there when I was little, and we were undercover so we were left in peace. You would call it our super special mission,” he smiled at the memory.

Shmi managed to smile a little. “You wanted to order everything on the menu.”

“I probably still do,” Anakin smirked as he opened the speeder’s door for her. “But tonight the dinner is on me,” he chuckled.

“Well, alright,” his mother conceded. “But you’re not driving us.”

“I feel offended. You don’t like my driving?” Anakin pouted.

“You’re reckless and nearly get into at least one accident every time you go out,” she pointed out.

“You’re hurting my feelings, but alright, I won’t drive. This time.”

With that cue, Rex took the driver’s seat, while Anakin helped his mother into the back of the speeder. “It’s going to be fun,” he said as he sat next to her. “We haven’t done something

the two of us for a while.”

“I’ve been... trying to give you two space,” Shmi sighed. “It hasn’t been going very well, obviously.”

“We can talk about that later. You haven’t told me a lot about your relationship with Cliegg and if he is going to become my stepfather, I would like to know a little more,” he smiled.

Shmi blinked at him, perplexed. “Stepfather? Ani, I’d hardly say we’re *that* serious.”

“Mom, I have never seen you so in love,” Anakin snorted. “This has been the only man to ever awaken something in you and maybe you think you are not that serious, but maybe he has other ideas?”

“Well, I mean...” Shmi’s cheeks started to flush. “It’d hardly be appropriate, would it? For me to... before you and Padmé, I mean.”

“Why?” He chuckled. “You’re the Queen mother, you have the right to have your own life and not depend on my decisions.”

“Ani, that’s not... I want to make sure you two are happy and settled before I start looking to my own life. The way you should have been if I hadn’t threatened Padmé two years ago.”

“We are on a good path to do that. To be happy. But we need to do it at our own pace. If you’re ready to marry Cliegg and build a life with him, nothing, not even me, should stop you from doing that,” he smiled as he squeezed her hand. “I’m serious, Mom. If you want to be with Cliegg, don’t let me hold you back. I would never forgive myself.”

“You’ve been my life for twenty-two years, Ani. It’s hard to picture it without you.”

Anakin beamed at her. “I will always be in your life, Mom. You’re never getting rid of me. You’re just starting a new chapter with a man that clearly loves and cherishes you. You deserve it. More than anyone,” he kissed her cheek. ‘But you need to *stop* trying to control if I have children right now or not and making big decisions for me and Padmé.’ He added softly. “Deal?”

Shmi pursed her lips. “I’ll try harder.”

Her son snorted. “I’ll take what I can.”

“Sir, we’ve arrived at Dex’s Dinner,” Rex announced.

“Hungry?” Anakin asked her.

“Very. Do you know how little I eat in order to fit into these gowns?”

“Look at you, sounding like Padmé. You two will be besties in no time,” he quipped as he opened the door and left the speeder, holding out his hand to help her out.

“I suppose it hasn’t helped that Kitster and Teckla are due to have their little girl soon, aren’t they?”

“Not only them, but Obi-Wan and Satine are going to be parents soon too. You have baby fever. But Padmé and I don’t. We’ll be happy being these kids’ Auntie and Uncle until we feel ready about having our own. Mom, I’m still young.”

“But Padmé is older than you,” Shmi pointed out as she followed him from the speeder to the curb. “And I remember what a difficult birth you were when I was younger than she is now. There are risks, Anakin, even here in Imperial Center.”

“Mom, we can’t think like that. We would have to rush through life if we all believed there would be complications. We are both healthy and I am sure nothing is going to go wrong. It was a different time when I was born,” Anakin sighed as he pushed the door to Dex’s Diner open.

“I’m your mother, sweetheart, I’m never going to stop worrying.” Shmi slipped into a corner booth at the back of the diner without waiting for a serving droid to notice them. “It’s my nature. Force willing, you’ll understand one day.”

“I want to have that worry one day. But you worry like I’m five years old and not a grown up,” Anakin said as he sat in front of her. ‘I’m not a kid that’s going to go behind your back and try to pilot a speeder on his own,’ he shrugged as he picked a menu. “I’m the Emperor. I know what I want and where I want to go. You need to give me the benefit of the doubt and believe I know what I’m doing.”

“No one really ever does, my darling,” Shmi chuckled, waving at Dex as he passed by their table. “That’s the secret.”

“Trust me, at least,” Anakin chuckled.

“If it isn’t my two favorite customers,” Dex greeted them. “What are you two doing so far away from the Palace?” He chuckled.

“We’re here for the food, obviously,” he grinned.

“Ah, the kitchens at the Palace just don’t compare, do they?” Dex teased.

“Hey, I’ve invited you to be our Chef too many times,” Anakin pointed out. “Mom, what are you having?”

“Just the usual, please, Dex.” Shmi passed her menu over.

“What about you, kid?” Dex turned to Anakin. “The whole menu again?” He teased.

“While I do have the stomach for it, I don’t think it would portray a good picture of me in the HoloNet. How about giving me today’s special? With dessert included?” As his mother had done, he passed the menu over.

“Alright, you two, get comfortable, I’ll bring you your food right up!”

As Dex left them, Anakin leaned forward. “Mom, do you love Cliegg?”

“I... I think I do?” Shmi whispered. “I don’t know, it’s been so long since I felt like this... But love and marriage are almost two different things to me.”

“Mom, it took me a week — no, less — to know Padmé was the love of my life. I’m sure you’ve realized it by now. Try to imagine yourself without Cliegg. What if he left?” He questioned. ‘The way Padmé left me the first time,’ he added quietly. “What then?”

“I... I don’t know.”

"I'm sure you wouldn't miss being with him, speaking with him, scarring me for the rest of my life with other kind of free time activities... right? Business as usual..."

"Ani, why are you pushing me like this?" Shmi's knuckles turned white as she looked away. "I thought we weren't going to do that sort of thing anymore."

"I don't need it, you do," Anakin pointed out. "What's holding you back, Mom? This man is ready to marry you and love you for the rest of his life."

"Ani..."

"You need to hold on to him before he leaves."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," she confessed.

"You are supposed to be happy. If marrying him is what you need to do, then go ahead. I'll proudly give you away."

"Ani..." she said again.

"Mom, come on, I promise I won't be too far behind. I'm already looking for rings." Anakin finally confessed.

Shmi's face split into a delighted grin as she leaned across the booth and hugged him tightly. "That's all I needed to know," she said, sitting back and ruffling his hair.

Anakin just gaped at her. "You're unbelievable and next time, I'll let Padmé keep yelling at you."

"I'm going to make sure there isn't a next time."

"What do you mean?" He frowned.

"I mean, I won't push anymore. I promise."

"Mom, you two are the women of my life and all I want is for you to get along. I'm tired of splitting my time between you both because if we tried to have dinner together, you both take jabs at each other and if we do something outside the Palace, this happens," Anakin confessed. "I understand Padmé's side, she is angry. *Especialy* after you put her on an unwanted fertility treatment! I love you, but there is only so much I can defend you on."

"It won't happen again. You have my word," Shmi promised earnestly.

"I trust you. I'll speak with Padmé about what happened tonight. No matter her reasons, she can't yell at you like that." He smiled and reached over to squeeze her hand.

"I'm sure there's a reason," Shmi sighed, smiling softly. "The Senate has been working late quite a lot recently, maybe she's just tired."

"We all are. I just want this to be solved. I want you to be happy with Cliegg without worrying about my future. I'm happy with where I am right now. Everything else will come with time."

"Of course. Time." Shmi nodded, even though she didn't look entirely thrilled about.

"I'm going to apologize," Padmé mumbled as she brushed out her hair.

"It's not a bad idea," Anakin replied browsing through a new motor schematic for his ship, distracted. "Maybe you two can start afresh?"

"Maybe after I get back."

That made him look up. "Get back from where?" He asked crisply.

"Ani, I told you about this weeks ago. I'm scheduled for a diplomatic mission in the Outer Rim to check on Tatooine and a few of the other worlds that were part of my efforts in Amidala's Crusade."

Anakin sat up straighter. "I thought you had passed the reigns of Amidala's Crusade to someone else!"

"I did, but now that there's official Senate support and Imperial funding, I'm the liaison for the efforts," she explained. "It'll be a week, love, I'm just making sure everything's going smoothly."

"Padmé, you can't become an easy target like that. It would be one thing if no one knew you were my Consort. Things are different now. You are in more risk because of it," Anakin said alarmed. "I'll go with you. A week isn't too bad and my mom can take over my business here at the Capital."

"No." She shook her head. "You'd be in even more danger than I would, Ani, you know that. And a visit from you might lead to this becoming a circus. It needs to remain a small delegation."

"I'm not happy about this," he scowled. "This isn't how it should be."

"I'll be back before you even have time to miss me," Padmé promised, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "I promise."

"You need to be careful. You're taking a squadron from my Battalion with you. I can't let you out on the Galaxy when I have hidden enemies in every corner!" Anakin worried.

"Alright, I promise." Padmé put down her brush and started settling into bed. "And we'll talk every night. Like while I was gone before the coronation."

"If there's one night where you don't answer, I will go after you. No questions asked," he warned as he shut down his datapad and got into bed next to her.

"Ani, you're blowing it out of proportion."

"Tell me that when something tragic happens. You're too relaxed for your current position."

"You know this isn't going to change my mind."

"As long as you keep in mind that you have to speak with me every night and if you don't, I'm at your door the next morning, we're good."

"I understand perfectly, your Majesty." Padmé switched off the light beside her bed. "Goodnight, love."

“Goodnight, Angel.”

“Master Ani, Miss Padmé! Oh, do wake up, Master Kitster has been calling for you!” Padmé slowly turned, rubbing her eyes as Threepio ran around the bed in circles.

“What is going on?” Padmé mumbled.

“Mistress Teckla has gone into labor!” Threepio announced.

Anakin groaned and pushed the covers aside. “Kit must be freaking out,” he grabbed his dark blue robe. “I have to go before he has a nervous breakdown.”

“I’ll come with you, Teckla deserves *someone* from Naboo there with her,” Padmé said, following him out.

“I never asked, what about her family?” Anakin frowned, waiting for her.

“Only a brother, and he and his family are stationed with the Refugee Relief Movement in the Thousand Moons System,” Padmé explained as she pulled on her slippers and robe. “They couldn’t make it.”

“At least she has you,” he smiled. ‘And all of us. We’re her family as well.’ Anakin offered her his hand. “Let’s go support our best friends.”

“Thank goodness they live in the Palace with us.”

“Thank the Force that they are in a whole other wing with their newborn. We already don’t sleep enough,” he said teasingly.

“That’s what you get when you’re courting a Senator, your majesty.”

He just brought their joined hands to his lips and they left their bedroom, heading to the medical center. Kitster was pacing in front of a transparisteel wall that was separating him from the delivery room. Padmé clucked her tongue as she passed by him into the room. “They kicked me out,” Kitster explained miserably.

Anakin patted his back. “What did you do?” He chuckled. “Try to give her a breathing lesson? Order the medical droids around?”

“No, I was just,” Kitster sighed. “I was panicking. A lot. It’s scary stuff, Ani.”

“Yes, it is. A little life will depend on you now. May the Force be with her,” his best friend teased. “In just a few hours, you will be a father, Kit, and it’s natural to be scared. But I know you’ll do an amazing job.”

“I’m sure you’ll be better at it than me when it’s your turn,” Kitster sighed. “I could really use a drink right now, but I don’t want to leave her. I already can’t be in there with her, it’s the worst.”

“There is not way of knowing that, neither of us has experience at being a parent. When my time comes, I just hope I don’t screw up my kid too much,” he chuckled. “We can have a drink after your daughter is born and I get it, if the roles were reversed, I would *die* if I couldn’t be with Padmé. But Teckla is not alone.”

"It's not the same though." Kitster shifted back and forth as they watched Padmé lean in to whisper something to Teckla. "What's she saying? I don't know what's going on. Ani, Ani, I think I might faint, this is terrifying."

"Easy, Kit, take a deep breath. I'm sure Padmé is just letting her know you're out here, waiting for your baby girl, alright?" Anakin whispered and squeezed his shoulder, using the Force to sooth his best friend's worries. "I know we went through a rough patch, Kitster, but listen to me, it's going to be fine and you'll be the best father ever."

"Hey, no cheating," Kitster warned. "I might feel terrible right now, but I don't want to forget a second of this."

"I'm not cheating. I'm avoiding you to die from a heart attack before your daughter is born," he chuckled. "Does my niece have a name already?"

Kitster looked down, smiling a little. "Maybe."

"Do I get to hear it?"

"Annika." Anakin blinked at him and for a few seconds, he was speechless. "What, nothing to say?"

"It's a wonderful name," he laughed. "Any special meaning behind it?"

"What do you think, you idiot?" Kitster asked, rolling his eyes. "I can still change my mind."

"No, no need to change. Thank you, Kitster, it's... it's quite the honor, you know," Anakin blushed. "I will protect her as if she were my own. I promise."

"Good, because Emperor or not, I *will* make you regret it if she gets so much as a scrape when you're watching her."

"She will be protected. Even if we have to play in a personalized, cushioned room without sharp edges."

"You are a very good honorary uncle."

"Thank you. I always hoped that one day our children could grow up together and be best friends, like we are, and I'm so happy to have that dream come true. I know your daughter will be the best honorary big sister, Kit, and that you will be a favorite honorary uncle," Anakin chuckled.

"I don't know, I think I have a lot more competition," Kitster said, finally relaxing a little.

"Hmm, are you worried about Padmé's brother-in-law or Obi-Wan?" Anakin snickered.

"I was thinking more about the clones," his friend corrected. "The 501st is practically family."

"They are, yes, and they will be very useful when I need them to spy on their dates and possible boyfriends and girlfriends. Not to mention, babysitting. But don't worry, I'll let you borrow some of them," he smirked.

“Ani, maybe don’t spy on them. That’s the kind of thing your mom was doing. I don’t think your kids would appreciate it any more than you did.”

“I’ll think about it,” Anakin waved him off. “But I’m not becoming a parent anytime soon. You are.” He grinned. The transparisteel looking into the delivery room darkened, and the blood started draining from Kitster’s face.

“What’s going on? I can’t see her anymore. Ani?”

“Calm down, I think they are actually delivering your baby,” Anakin said. “That’s why we can’t see inside. A few more minutes and you’ll be holding her.”

“I think I’m gonna faint.”

“Don’t! You don’t want to miss this, do you? Holding her for the first time?” Anakin scolded. “Be a man, Kitster, the last thing Teckla needs is to see you on the floor when your baby is born.”

“When it’s Padmé’s turn, we’ll see how you handle it.”

“By then I would have learned from yours and Obi-Wan’s mistakes,” he smirked.

“Keep telling yourself that, Ani.”

At that moment, Padmé opened the door, smiling. “Get in here, you two. She’s almost here.”

Anakin had to nudge a petrified Kitster inside the delivery room. His friend shot him a grateful look as he carefully entered the room and one of the medical droids focused on him, looking almost judgemental. “I’m calmer, I promise,” he mumbled, rushing to Teckla’s side and kissing her forehead. “I’m so sorry, T. I’m here now.”

The Emperor stood by his girlfriend and wrapped one arm around her waist, kissing her forehead. “Does it give you any ideas?” He muttered with a smile.

“Yes. Painkillers. A lot of them.” Padmé rubbed her hands together. “Teckla nearly broke my fingers.”

Anakin chuckled. “We’re lucky, we can get experience before we go through this ourselves.”

“That’s one way to think of it,” Padmé agreed, leaning her head on his shoulder as the medical droids guided Teckla through her last pushes. “We’re also lucky birth control has kept working for us so far.”

Teckla gasped as the baby finally slipped free and the Emdee caught her. “Oh, Force...” Kitster gasped, rushing to take his daughter from the droid so it could cut the cord. ‘Annie, it’s okay, Daddy’s here.’ Little Annie shrieked and squirmed in her father’s arms, refusing to calm down. “Wow, you’ve got a pair of lungs on you...”

Anakin smiled widely as he saw his friend hold his daughter for the first time. Kitster, the boy who would encourage him for pod races when his mother was stuck in endless meetings throughout the day. Kitster, who would push him to be a little more outgoing, who surrounded himself with beautiful women and encouraged Anakin to do the same, only to give up once he

realized his friend was not like that. He was a father and the look of pure love in Kitster's eyes... Anakin couldn't wait until he was bearing that look for his own child.

"Congratulations!" He wished and reached out to squeeze the one who had been his brother, not in blood, but in every other sense. "She's beautiful, Kit."

"Are we sure you didn't cheat on me?" Kitster teased Teckla, who just rolled her eyes.

"Get out of here, you fool, I'm not done yet," she scolded. "And your father needs to meet his granddaughter."

"Come on, Kit," Anakin chuckled. "I'll go with you to meet Rakir. Don't worry, Teckla, I'll make sure he doesn't drop Annika."

"You're not helping!" Padmé scolded, shaking her head and smiling indulgently. "Go on, I've got things under control here."

"I love you," Kitster told his wife with a smile.

"I know."

As both men left the delivery room, Anakin patted Kitster's back. "You're an official grown up," he peered down at Annika. "You're going to be blasting boys off your doorstep in no time."

"Or girls. Both, maybe..." Kitster shrugged. "I'd rather not think about it, the next nine months are daunting enough without thinking about sixteen years from now. I feel terrible for any daughter you have though. You're not going to let anyone near her."

"No, I'm not," Anakin quickly replied. "My daughter. My baby. Anyone else is irrelevant."

"You sound like your mother."

"You sound like Padmé."

"That just means I'm smart."

Anakin rolled his eyes. "Let's go meet Rakir before parenthood gets you *too* mature."

"That'll be the day..." Kitster shifted Annika in his arms. "Just ask your mother, I'm going to be an idiot forever."

"Careful with my mom, she has baby fever. She'll hog Annika if you let her," he snorted.

"Good thing I'm not going to let her then," Kitster smirked. "You know, we could solve two problems at once if we just made plans to get our kids to date."

"I think it's still going to take a while, so why not set up Annika with Obi-Wan's son?" Anakin smirked. "They'll be close in age."

"If that kid is anything like Obi-Wan, he'll bore her to death first. Besides, maybe your son will have his dad's taste for older women."

"Let's see if you feel that way when sixteen, eighteen years from now, you're catching them making out in a broom closet."

“I’ll take that bet,” his friend chuckled as he tickled his daughter under the chin. “Who’s gonna be as gorgeous as her mom? You are, yes, you are.”

Anakin shook his head. “She already has you wrapped around her pinkie.”

“Just wait, Ani, you’ll understand soon enough.”

His friend just smiled as he thought that yes, soon enough, he would want that. A family. A baby to whom he would be completely devoted to and that would make the sleepless nights worth it. Lazy mornings in bed, faking sickness so he could just be with the woman he loved and the son or daughter, maybe both, that they should have. There were a lot of things he wanted to do, but the first thing was to enjoy his relationship with that extraordinary woman.

14. Misadventures with Vacations

“Ani, you need to relax.”

“Padmé’s not back yet. She has been unreachable, Mom. I should have left already to search for her, staying here is driving me mad!” Anakin snapped.

“Don’t lose hope just yet.” Shmi rubbed the simple gold band on her finger, Cliegg’s engagement gift to her. “Padmé’s very resourceful.”

“That’s not the point! She is definitely in danger and I can’t protect her! I told her this would happen. I told her and she still didn’t listen!”

“You trust her, don’t you?” His mother sighed. “She’ll be back.”

“I trust her, but what if something happened because of me? Because of who I am?” Anakin said, desperately. “That’s it. I’m leaving, I’m going to go after her.” The datapad on his desk beeped with an alert, projecting a holo of Obi-Wan.

“Anakin, it’s Obi-Wan. Padmé just made it into Mandalorian airspace, we’re getting her a new ship and an escort home, stay where you are.”

“What happened to her? Is she alright? How long until she arrives in Imperial Center?” Anakin fired the questions, relief of hearing she was alive but an astounding weight on his shoulders to know what had happened.

“Apparently, she’s spent the last month fighting off bounty hunters and pirates that were sent after her by the Hutts. There’s quite a price on her head in the Outer Rim. She should be home by tomorrow, assuming we can move everyone into the new ship quickly.”

“Can I speak with her?” Anakin sighed, knowing he would have to find a way to deal with the Hutts and free the Galaxy from their presence. They were vile beings, cruel and a disease. “Please?”

“Just a moment.” There was a little distortion and feedback as the feed transferred and Padmé’s face came into view. There was a bacta patch on her forehead and dark shadows under her eyes, but she looked to be intact.

“Hi, Ani.”

He almost fell to his knees in relief. “Hi, Angel,” he replied softly. ‘Didn’t I tell you that I should have been with you?’ He shook his head. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, fine, we’ve just got a very full brig,” she answered nonchalantly. *“This one slimebag, Hondo Ohnaka, knocked out our comms and put poor Artoo out of commission, that’s why we couldn’t reach you.”*

“I’ll fix Artoo once you get to the Palace. Padmé, I told you this would happen. Why didn’t you listen?” Anakin said. “I have been going mad with worry.”

“Because it would have happened either way and this way, the Galaxy wasn’t stuck without you for a month.”

“It should have been a *week*,” he said stubbornly. “You’re never leaving in a mission like this again. It’s too dangerous. I will deal with the Hutts myself for what they have done and the bounty hunters will get their punishment.”

“We’ll talk about it when I get back,” she sighed. “I’m trying to make this go as quickly as possible, but it’s still looking like it’ll take at least another day.”

“Obi-Wan told me. I am glad you are safe and at least I know where you are.” Anakin said quietly. “We’ll talk when you’re home.”

“I love you.”

“I love you more.” He turned off the holo and sat down, resting his head on his hands. “I am going to destroy those Hutts. Even if I have to go down to Tatooine and do it myself.”

“You’re talking about starting a war,” his mother pointed out. “The Hutts are more powerful than you may realize, Anakin.”

“I’m more powerful than all of them put together. The war will end before it begins. I can’t let this attack on my Consort go unpunished,” Anakin shouted, a whiplash through the Force vibrating off of him.

“You’re more than welcome to bring it up at the council meeting. The one you’re very nearly late for.”

“I don’t care about the council meeting, my Consort was nearly killed by bounty hunters. What I should do is fly to Mandalore myself and bring her home *myself*. I can’t concentrate on what those pesky little men want right now.” Anakin scowled.

“Ani. Focus.”

Anakin just gritted his teeth and stared at his mother with dark blue eyes. “I’ll try.” Shmi pursed her lips, but nodded, watching him storm off to the council chambers.

Kitster was still on his parental leave, so his seat was empty, as were Padmé’s and Obi-Wan’s, but Bail Organa and Mace Windu were both present. And so was Mas Amedda. “No word yet from Senator Amidala?” the Chagrian asked snidely. “Such a shame.”

“Actually, Senator Amidala is in Mandalore at the moment,” Anakin replied with a scowl. “She has arrived there, safely, but apparently with a ship filled with bounty hunters that wanted her head. The Hutts are responsible. It is why I would like us to discuss a way to deal with this plague.”

“How... Fortunate...” But Amedda’s knuckles tightened and Anakin heard his thoughts echo through the Force. *Those incompetent fools! How many plans must I enforce to get this little brat in his proper place without any distractions?*

His lightsaber was ignited and at Amedda’s throat in the blink of an eye. Nobody noticed him move or act, his reaction was immediate and intense and when the rest of the Council paid attention, their Emperor had his bright blue blade at the Grand Vizier’s throat. “You,” he

said icily. "It has been you all along," his eyes flashed gold for a moment, reminding Amedda of the old Emperor's ones.

"Your Majesty... I don't know what you mean..." he stammered nervously, backing up against the wall. "Please..."

"What's going on?" Bail asked in alarm.

"You think your mental defenses are a match for my powers, you ignorant fool?" Anakin spat. 'You've tried to have Padmé murdered. You're trying to take my throne from me,' he hissed, the bright blue beam dangerously close to decapitating the Vizier. "*Admit it, Amedda!*"

"No! The throne is yours, I sought only to ensure you would fulfill the destiny your father foresaw!" Amedda protested. "She would have kept you from it!"

"She is my future! My father was a madman!" Anakin shouted. "You're trying to be excused for treason by alleging you're doing right by me?"

"It was my duty to the Empire! I was there when your father created it!"

"Your duty was to *me* !" Anakin said, enraged, and the whole room shook. "You are going to pay for what you've done."

"Your Majesty, he must stand for a proper trial!" Bail urged, reaching out to grab Anakin's arm despite the danger. "This conspiracy may run deeper than just him! His accomplices may retaliate."

"Cody!" Anakin shouted, not budging and the Commander entered, widening his eyes at the sight. "Comm Rex and tell him Mas Amedda is to be taken to the dungeons, questioned and imprisoned until a trial is scheduled."

"Yes, sir!" Cody saluted and hurried out of the Council room.

"If she had died..." Anakin began slowly, eyes darkening and glowing partially yellow. "I would have torn you to pieces, making each blow agonizingly painful."

"Careful," Mace Windu warned, finally speaking. "Those are the actions of a Sith."

"I am not one of your Jedi, Master Windu," Anakin hissed. "I don't need you to tell me what my actions mean."

"I have a duty to advise you and protect the galaxy," Windu replied calmly. "No matter what."

"If you move, I will strike you," he said to Amedda as he finally took two steps back and turned his lightsaber off, at the same time that Rex, Cody and Fives entered the chamber. "Take him out of my sight."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison, grabbing Amedda by the arms and dragging him from the room.

"This meeting is adjourned," Anakin said. "You are all dismissed."

"Then there is no war?"

“Not today. Go.”

Windu bowed slowly, but there was an uneasy tension between the two of them as he left. Bail lingered a little longer. “I’m sorry that happened,” he said quietly.

“I apologize for the situation, Bail,” Anakin said, still tense.

“I understand why you reacted as you did. Amedda crossed the line.”

“Severely,” Anakin scowled. “We’ll continue the meeting tomorrow.”

Bail nodded in understanding and was the last one to leave the Council chambers. Anakin sat back down, a throbbing headache making him groan. Windu’s warning was not uncalled for and Anakin knew it. He had a tendency to let his worst temper come to light and be gravely influenced by the dark side. He knew he needed a little meditation to calm down and be able to think clearly, but he just couldn’t help the hate and the anger he felt for the Grand Vizier.

Actually, no, he didn’t need meditation. He needed to see Padmé. It couldn’t wait.

Padmé stirred to find that someone was beside her and slowly rubbed the sleep from her eyes to see that Anakin was holding her. “Ani?” she mumbled, nudging his shoulder.

“Hmm, good morning Angel,” he said sleepily as he twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. “How are you feeling? Better?”

“Fine, fine, but what are you doing here?” Padmé asked in confusion. “I told you I was on the way back.”

“I couldn’t wait. I had to come and escort you home myself so I could make sure you were safe and protected. I believe in my troops, but I am not putting you at risk again,” he said, pained.

“What happened?” she sat up, frowning at the sight of his face. “Tell me.”

“I found out who was behind your bounty hunters,” Anakin sighed. “It was Mas Amedda.”

“You’re kidding.” Padmé ran a hand through her hair as she took a slow breath. “Well, I suppose that makes him our prime suspect for who helped Miraj blockade Imperial Center too.”

“Yes, I thought of that too. He probably thought that if I married Miraj, I would be easy to control,” Anakin nodded. “He’s in custody now. I nearly killed him when I discovered.”

“Nearly?”

“Bail stopped me in time. Windu was also very worried I would suddenly turn to the dark side,” he rolled his eyes.

“Master Windu is overly cautious like that,” Padmé sighed. “But I’m glad you held back. You’re no tyrant, Ani.”

"If I had killed him, I wouldn't feel any regret. He deserves to be severely punished for his actions against *you*, against the Empire and he was *lucky* someone was there to stop me!" He ranted. "If something had happened to you..." he trailed off.

"But it didn't." She moved to press a hand to his cheek with a soft smile. "You poor thing, you're all wound up. Maybe we shouldn't go back to Imperial Center just yet."

"Getting away sounds like a dream, actually," Anakin sighed leaning into her touch. "Any ideas where we can run off to?"

"I want to show you the Lake Country," Padmé answered. "And to make some *good* memories on Naboo. Considering last time..."

As soon as he heard Naboo, he winced and shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, Naboo is not my favorite planet and not one I feel comfortable on, all things considered."

"Do you trust me?"

"I do, but..." he hesitated. "I think the planet is ruined for me."

"Am I ruined for you too?" Padmé countered in a very reasonable tone. "This will help us move past those bad memories and create new, better ones. I swear on my life. On my love for you."

"No, you're not ruined for me, it's just..." Anakin sighed in defeat. "Alright, we can head to Naboo. I'll warn my mother and ask her to stay in charge for the next couple of days."

"You won't regret it."

Anakin just sighed and kissed her forehead. "Sleep a little longer."

"Stay with me?"

"Always, Angel."

"Almost there." Padmé held onto the edge of the boat with one hand and Anakin's fingers with the other. "You're going to love it. Trust me."

Her boyfriend gave her a polite smile and squeezed her hand. Naboo was beautiful, that much was certain. But since he set foot on the planet again, all he can remember was his last visit. *Anakin, please, just go, before this is harder for either of us. You'll be a wonderful Emperor, just... not with me. I can't be what you need in an Empress.* "I believe in you," he said nodding slowly.

The boat came to a stop at the dock of Varykino, and Padmé carefully got to her feet as the old ferryman tethered the boat to the nearest post. "Watch your step, Ani. There are more than a few childhood holos of me and Sola falling into the lake."

"Can't wait until I ask your mother to show me," he quipped as he followed her out of the boat.

"You're hilarious." Padmé rolled her eyes, tugging him up the steps to the terrace of the villa. 'Welcome to Varykino.' She spread her arms outwards to indicate the lush islands,

crystal blue lakes and looming mountains that surrounded them. “What do you think?”

“It’s breathtaking, I’m starting to understand why you love it so much,” he laughed as he looked around the island. It was stunning, with the vibrant colors and the incredible life force that surrounded it. “Growing up here must have been wonderful,” he mused. He’d grown up used to the robotic city and traffic lights. Too many buildings, not enough nature.

“See over there?” Padmé pointed across the lake to another, even bigger mansion on the water. “That’s Convergence. It was the ancestral home of House Palpatine until it was sold by your father when he started his political career. It always fascinated me as a child.”

Anakin usually forgot his father was from Naboo as well. “I never came here or heard stories about his childhood. I was a baby when he passed away and my mother never said a lot about him or his origins. It’s easy to forget my heritage is here too.”

“That was part of why I wanted to bring you here.” She slipped both her hands into his again, squeezing them tightly. “The other thing was to ask you something.”

“You brought me all the way to Naboo to ask me something?” Anakin chuckled. “Alright, I’m curious, what is it?”

Padmé swallowed, looking down at her shimmering blue skirts for a moment before looking back up at him. “Ani, will you marry me?”

I love you, I just can’t marry you! I told you already, it’s not about us! It’s about me! Anakin took one step back, surprised. “What? Padmé, why... I just... *what?*” He stared at her for a few seconds. “Are you pregnant? Is that it?”

“*What?*” Padmé gasped. “No! Force, no! Have you been listening to your mother’s baby talk again?”

“Of course not, but then why are you asking me to marry you?” Anakin said flustered. “I thought we had agreed on taking it slow?”

“Ani, over the last month, there have been countless times where pirates and bounty hunters very nearly took my life, and every time, all I could think about was what we’d never get to have if that happened. And I know we agreed to take it slow, but we only have so much time. I don’t agree with everything your mother says, but I know that I want to be your wife and have children with you and I want to spend every day making sure you know how much I love you.” She paused and let go of his hands so she could pull his face down and press their foreheads together. “I have made so many foolish choices when it has come to us. I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“I am not saying that I don’t want to marry you, I think I was clear enough about those intentions,” Anakin replied softly, her words touching him and making him smile as his hands held her waist. “I just wanted to be the one to propose and honestly, I fear we might be rushing into it again. I love you, I do. Very much so. I want a life with you, just as you described. But we do have time, love, we can’t keep making decisions based on near-death situations.”

Padmé’s face fell a little. “I understand. You’re right.”

“Hey, I didn’t want to ruin your happy mood,” he sighed as he caressed her cheek. “I didn’t say *no*, sweetheart, we can agree this is more of an... engaged to be engaged sort of promise.”

“I don’t know if that’s a thing,” she laughed a little.

“It can be our thing,” he said cheekily.

“Oh, alright,” Padmé agreed, finally smiling properly. “Do you think that calls for celebration?”

“Of course,” he pecks her lips. “Everything does with you. You are not mad, right? I can trust you on this? I don’t want you to stew on my actions and make me regret them later,” he winced.

“I trust you, but I still feel pretty idiotic for bringing you all the way out here so I could propose,” Padmé admitted, flushing bright pink. “The whole thing was much more... romantic in my head.”

“Since we’re here, we might as well enjoy our free time. I am sure my mother would love for us to get back home engaged, but it’s not the time yet and we are happy just the way we are right now,” he kissed her forehead. “We could make some happy memories for us here, though.”

“I think I can agree to that,” Padmé conceded, tugging at his collar. “Fancy a tour of the villa?”

“Lead the way,” he smiled.

“I almost don’t want to go back.” Padmé stirred her new contraceptive mix into her tea before taking a sip as she sat in the armchair opposite the bed. “It’s been so much fun, don’t you think?”

Anakin just watched her, lazily, as he laid naked in bed, a sheet covering him from the waist down. “I certainly have begun to forget how you broke my heart here,” he smirked. “I know what you mean, though, I wish we could just stay here but unfortunately, I have a duty to this Galaxy and that means we have to go back,” he pouted as he hugged her pillow close.

“Great.” Padmé finished the tea and pulled open her robe, casually displaying where he’d torn the skirt of her nightgown for easier access. “Then I guess we better make this last night count before it’s back to business.”

“Besides, my mother is getting married and I would like her to dedicate herself to the wedding planning and leave the Galaxy to me. Now, why don’t you come here and let me tear the rest of that nightgown off of you?”

“Why don’t you ask nicely first?”

“Please, Miss Naberrie?” He asked, blue eyes wide, gleaming with mischief.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Padmé smirked, crossing her legs. He pouted. “Why don’t you make me?” Her smirk grew wider. “I think there’s something very sexy in the way a man takes control.”

He just raised his eyebrows at the challenge and then she began feeling a tingling sensation, as a ghost touch began to delicately pull her robe off of her shoulders, tugging at the straps of her nightgown. The ripping sound of the soft fabric echoed in the room as the nightgown kept tearing at the place he had ripped the previous night.

Padmé smiled, standing as the nightgown fell away, leaving her just as naked as he was. “Like what you see, your majesty?”

Anakin simply nodded, licking his lips as he crawled in the bed, the sheet falling away, towards her and began kissing up her stomach, her breasts, until he reached her lips and took her breath away with a searing kiss, his tongue invading her mouth in a quest to taste her and possess her. He gently bit her lower lip as he pulled away. “Indeed, Miss Naberrie, why won’t you show your Emperor just how much you are devoted to him?”

“Lie back, my lord, and I’ll grant your wish.” He smirked and did as he was told, lying back on the bed, but never taking his eyes off of her. Padmé climbed over the edge of the bed, straddling his feet as she bent over his body, running her tongue over the tip of his cock. “Hello, darling.”

“You certainly have his, mine, our whole attention,” Anakin breathed.

“I have more than that.” Padmé took a deep breath and then swallowed the length of his member until he hit the back of her throat. *I have all of you.*

“Yes, yes you do, love,” he hummed as one hand tangled itself in her curls, hips rocking forward. A muffled whimper rumbled through Padmé’s body as she moved in tandem with him. Her back rose and fell as she tried to breathe with her mouth full.

Ani...

He moaned at the feeling and briefly closed his eyes as the hold on her hair tightened. “Right there, love, don’t stop.”

Padmé swallowed, her chest heaving as her breathing grew more labored. *Hurry*, her desperate thought echoed in his head, *please, Ani...*

Anakin groaned as he came into her mouth, his orgasm rushing through his body in wave after wave of pleasure, making him super sensitive to her touch, her presence. Padmé pulled back, gasping for breath as his cum stained her lips. “Oh, Force,” she whispered, sitting back as she recovered. “You’re incredible, you know that, right?”

“I will take your word for it, love,” he said with a sly smile as he sat up and tugged her into sitting on his lap, straddling his waist. He claimed her mouth, kissing her and tasting himself on her lips. It should have made him uneasy, but it only fuelled his desire for the woman in his arms, the woman he would never take for granted. They have been through so much already, that taking each other for granted was something they would never do. He broke the kiss and left a trail of hot, wet kisses down her throat, over her collarbone, until he reached her breasts and took one into his mouth and sucked, kneading the other with his hand.

Padmé moaned, tipping her head back as she relished the feeling of his attention. “How are you so good at this?”

Releasing her breast, he moved up to kiss her jaw. "Practice?" He smirked as he moved back down. 'Raw talent?' He added with a low chuckle before taking her other breast into his mouth and sucking, giving it the same attention before releasing it as well and moving suddenly, pinning her underneath him. "Maybe because your body *deliciously* responds to *my* touch," he moved one hand up her leg until he gripped one of her cheeks, "and *my* lips," he adds softly, brushing his lips over her jawline. "The plain fact you're mine makes me *good* at anything that serves to give you pleasure."

"So you're cheating?" she teased as she closed her eyes. 'I might have known.' Her knees rose up on either side of his hips, making it that much easier for his cock to brush against the dark curls that covered her own sex and the pink folds that lay just beneath it. "You had me addicted to you from the very first kiss."

"My first and only," he chuckled as he was able to enter her easily from this new angle. He bit his lower lip at the amazing sensation of her body clenching around him, her warmth spreading and he let out a small sigh of satisfaction. "There is no one I love more or will love beside you. I'm yours just as much as you are mine. Forever." Then he began moving, slowly and sweetly making love to her. He was in no rush for the moment to end.

"Save some of those words for when it's your turn to propose."

He chuckled. "I have plenty more ready for when the time is right."

"Then just shut up and kiss me," Anakin smirked before thrusting into her again and swallowed her moan with his lips.

15. The End of the Meddling

“Are you quite alright in there, my lady?”

“Fine, fine, Threepio, don’t—”

“I must go get Master Ani, he’ll be quite distressed!” The protocol droid hurried off before he could be told otherwise.

Shmi just sighed and sat back on the ground of her private fresher. She hadn’t felt this awful in a very long time and she suspected it had something to do with that restaurant Cliegg insisted on going a few nights ago. Her stomach has been uneasy and she has been unable to keep any food down! It was a pain, it reminded her of when she had been pregnant with Anakin. All she did for the first trimester was throw up and be an emotional mess. It was *not* a nice experience. *Pregnant...* Shmi frowned as she thought about it for a moment and her fingers skimmed over her midriff. *Could I...? No! It’s such a ridiculous idea!* She shook her head and stood up, only to be hit with a wave of nausea again and she was back on her knees emptying what little was left.

“Shmi?” Padmé’s voice was muffled through the door. “Threepio said you weren’t feeling well, is everything alright in there?”

The older woman frowned and thought for a second about ignoring Padmé altogether. It was still a difficult relationship between them and her mood was already sour for the constant heaving throughout the morning. “I’m fine,” she replied, trying to sound polite, as she splashed some cold water in her face. “Threepio is just being Threepio.” She would cancel her meetings and stay in her rooms, sipping on a nice tea to fight the nausea, and she would be alright the next morning. It was definitely the restaurant’s food. *Even if Cliegg hadn’t suffered from any nausea yet, and they had eaten the same.* Shmi frowned as she started reapplying her make-up. *My stomach is much more sensitive to exotic foods. He’s used to it.* Yes, yes, that was definitely it.

“Are you certain you don’t want an Emdee to come take a look? I can get one,” the younger woman offered.

Shmi pursed her lips and looked herself in the mirror, straightening her shoulders. She was a little pale, the make-up only going so far to hide the bags under her eyes. She felt tired and nauseous but it was something she could easily solve with an herbal tea and a good night of sleep. She opened the door and gave a polite smile to his son’s girlfriend. “I’m certain, Senator. You can be on your way. I’m sure there is a lot that requires your attention.” She went to her dresser and grabbed her datapad. She asked the kitchens for some tea and a message to her aide to cancel her meetings for the day. “I would like to rest, if you don’t mind.”

Padmé did not respond, keeping her back turned as she examined one of the cabinets. All Shmi could hear was the rustle of skirts and clicks of metal and glass being moved. “This tea, the one from Naboo... how often do you drink it?”

“Almost every night,” Shmi replied as she sat in one of the armchairs. ‘I enjoy a warm cup of tea before bed,’ she added. *When Cliegg lets me finish a full cup of tea...* a small smile plays on her lips as she leans back and opens a holobook. She was not in the mood for politics and would take care of her work the following day. “You don’t have to stay with me, Senator.” Shmi added as she realized Padmé was still standing in her room and she really didn’t want to have an argument or fight with her, she was too tired for that.

“Um,” Padmé paused, nervously fingering a strand of her hair as she held the box of tea leaves in her other hand. “I... I have to apologize. What I did was incredibly immature and brash and wrong, and I should have told you... especially given the current circumstances...”

Shmi frowned and turned to the younger woman. “I don’t follow... why are you apologizing? Certainly not because of one of our many fights? I have grown tired of them and you need to admit I haven’t done anything else to rush you or Ani into an unwanted step of your relationship,” she rambled. “You need to be specific, Senator. And brief. I don’t want to be unpleasant but I would love to be alone and read my holobook in peace.”

“Those fertility boosters you tried to have Threepio switch with my contraceptives,” Padmé admitted slowly. “I had him put them into that box of tea. I figured you would catch me, but I just... wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine.”

At first, Shmi was confused but then it dawned on her what Padmé meant. Her pregnancy thoughts were not that far-fetched after all. As the former Empress, her posture remained the same and while her face might have paled a bit further, she just swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and licked her dry lips. Water, she needed water. “I see,” Shmi replied quietly. She was still fertile, her cycle happened every month. It was not an impossible idea. ‘I guess what comes around, goes around, but you shouldn’t worry,’ clearing her throat, Shmi adjusted her position in the armchair and started reading the holobook again. “We’re careful,” she added, even though that was not always the truth but she was still wrapping her brain around the possibility of being pregnant at forty-two and after such a short period of time of being married. She would later call an emdee to have a quick test done. It was purely to confirm it was nothing. But if it was... Shmi didn’t really want to consider the possibility. Would she be mad at the younger woman? Perhaps. But Padmé had only done what Shmi herself had tried, which gave her no high ground to scold the other woman.

“I’m sorry,” Padmé repeated. “I shouldn’t have done it to begin with.” She curtsied awkwardly and set down the tea box before slipping out of the room.

Shmi threw the holobook to the nearby table and stood, grabbing the tea box and went to the fresher to dispose of the rest of the herbs. Panic was beginning to take over her. She was over forty and she already had a grown-up son. This was not an age to have another baby, it was an age to enjoy her life after carrying the Empire for so long at her shoulders. Enjoy her wonderful new husband. Travel and have some time off. *This* was not in her plans.

“Sweetheart, are you alright? We’re going to be late,” Cliegg called from the hallway.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, steadying her nerves before replying. “Can you go without me?” Shmi questioned as she left the fresher and offered her husband a smile.

“I think I’d fare better facing a horde of angry Tusken,” Cliegg said. “I would much rather be with you. It’s just another party. There’ll be another one.”

"I won't refuse your company, obviously, but are you sure? I'm difficult today," she pouted before laughing, trying not to show him how tense she really was. She didn't want to worry him over nothing. "Please, dear, if you want to go, I won't mind. You would be representing us both and support Ani. He's suffering so much pressure with Amedda's execution and I don't feel capable of being there for him today."

"He'll have Padmé by his side all night, she'll do more good for him than I ever could."

"Yes, she does, she just loves to be a good doer," Shmi said under her breath as she adjusted his collar.

"Did you two get into another fight?"

"No, no. Nothing like that, it was just a small confession, I was thinking out loud," Shmi smiled at him. "If we're staying inside, you're watching a holomovie with me. I feel like cuddling and sleeping."

"That sounds infinitely more enjoyable," Cliegg smiled back as he hugged her. "Though I admit, I'm still not used to having so much free time to do *nothing*, how do you endure it?"

"After years of being Empress and constantly moving around and having things to do, it's a nice change," Shmi argued as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Aren't we at a time in our lives where we should enjoy a little time off? Early retirement?"

"I suppose," he nodded, moving to sit on the edge of the bed with her in his lap. "Though it does also bring about a certain sadness... I wish I could have given this kind of a life to Owen before now."

"It's always a good time to give our children a good life and I am sure Owen was happy with the life you gave him. You gave him everything you could and he's a wonderful man because of it," she beamed and kissed his cheek. "You're a father that he's very proud of, Cliegg, you should never regret anything."

"Oh, no, I don't regret my choices, but all the same... A part of me would like the chance to do it again. If that were something you wanted, obviously."

She couldn't believe his words, it was like he could see into the future or read her mind. Either that or this was a tremendous coincidence. "Are you speaking about having a child?" Shmi asked quietly, but not in a reproving way, she truly was curious as to this little secret of his. Cliegg had never spoken about it.

"Maybe a little," he admitted. "I'm sorry to spring it on you like this."

"You should never worry about sharing things with me," Shmi said as she caressed his cheek. "But... look at us, Cliegg, we're not exactly young, are we?" she sighed. "Our children are grown men, looking to begin families in their nearby futures. We would be parents at the same time as we would be grandparents. A child would grow with their nieces or nephews. We would be so old when they reach their teens and *how* are we going to manage the patience to go through that phase all over again?" the words tumbled out of her mouth in a rush. All of the unknown fears of a possible pregnancy assailing her at once and making her lightheaded.

Thankfully, Cliegg had a steady hold on her, otherwise, she would have dropped to the ground. "A pregnancy in my age has risks. For the baby's life, for *my* life. This sounds

selfish, I know, but we have to look at the whole picture, don't we? The unslept nights would begin again, can you do this? Can we?" she just hoped he put an end to her rant before she had a panic attack. 'Sleeping three hours, organizing our days around the baby's schedule, forgetting social life altogether and do we want to raise it here? In Imperial Center? Do you want to go home to Tatooine? Do I want to go home to Bellassa and give our child the kind of childhood I wanted to give Anakin?' Shmi only now realized her eyes were filling up with tears and she immediately stood from his lap. "I'm sorry, I... I need some fresh air..." she said, sounding like a complete mess, and before Cliegg could stop her she stormed out of the room, lifting the skirts of her dress so she could *run* without tripping over them, destination unknown.

"Shmi!" Cliegg called after her, clearly confused about what had come over his wife. "Sweetheart, please..."

Shmi didn't stop and disappeared in one of the Palace's hallways. She hated how she left him behind, but panic was beginning to take over her and she needed somewhere to break down before gaining her composure back and come up with a decent explanation. Ending up in one of the many family rooms of the Palace, she thanked that it was the less used one for there was no one there and no one walking the hallways. As she sat in the couch that was facing the transparisteel that overlooked the Imperial City's busy evening, she broke down in tears. She removed the headpiece woven into her hair, throwing it to the ground and loosened her bodice as she was starting to feel suffocated.

"Your majesty?" Teckla Min— No, it was Teckla Banai now, holding her squirming daughter in her arms. "Are you alright? You ran right past me, it startled Annie. Should I get someone to help you?"

Startled, Shmi hurried to clean her cheeks and stop her crying. "No." her tone was probably sterner than she intended, but she wanted to be alone. "I just need to be alone, how is that so hard in a Palace this size?"

"Bwa," Annie said, reaching out a hand as her mother tried to shush her.

"I'm sorry... I'll go."

The Queen mother nodded stiffly as she grabbed her headpiece from the floor and waited for Teckla's departure. The Palace was crowded these days. "Thank you."

"Come on, baby, let's go find Daddy." Teckla headed off with her infant, who waved goodbye to Shmi as they left.

Sighing, Shmi laid down on the couch. Peace and quiet. It was taken for granted far too often and with a *baby* it was all but gone. She could be overreacting, maybe she wasn't pregnant after all and this was all for nothing. But Cliegg wanted to have a baby... she couldn't ignore that even if a pregnancy test came back negative.

Maybe they could talk about adopting an older child... Maybe... They should have talked this over sooner, but it wasn't possible to go back in time. Maybe when they had a grandchild it would change and that little baby will fill the need he has for a do over. The emotional labyrinth was making her feel drowsy and she covered herself with the blanket that was folded over the couch. Rest seemed like the best idea and she would just close her eyes for a second...

"Shmi. Shmi, wake up."

She made a face without opening her eyes and buried her face further into the pillow. "Later."

"You've been sleeping for almost a day," Padmé scolded.

"Ugh, why do you care?" Shmi grumbled, in an awful mood.

"Because we're more alike than you might think. I made a mistake, and now I'm trying to make amends."

Shmi finally sat up and ran her fingers through her wavy hair. "We don't have anything to talk about," she said groggily. "I am not going to tell you anything, because I have no moral high ground in this subject, but I'm not going to pretend I want to discuss this with you."

"You're going to have to make a decision because of this, and it's my fault you're in this position. I want to help."

"You've done enough and I am not even sure that *something* happened," Shmi scowled as she stood and grabbed her headpiece. "I don't want your help! I am able to care for this on my own."

"But you don't have to!" Padmé insisted. "You do not have to be on your own, you don't have to be in control of everything anymore!"

"Just because you're remorseful, it doesn't mean we're *friends* now. Yes, I am in this position because of you. Did I deserve it? Yes, I did. I tried to manipulate *your* life and this is my punishment and why would I want to share the burden with you?" Shmi seethed. "All you can do for me is keep your mouth shut about the situation and let me solve this problem my way. Not a word this to Anakin or anyone else."

"Fine," Padmé sighed. "I'll wait until you realize what you're doing is only going to hurt yourself."

"Stay out of my business, Senator, that's all I ask," Shmi stated and left the family room. She would have to face Cliegg... a loud groan escaped her lips as she thought about her awful reaction. She needed a good excuse. A good apology. She was already lucky that he accepted her with her flaws as it was, he didn't need reactions like this. She could lie... but say what? No, no lies. The half-truth. His idea was terrifying — no, scary or ambitious, something that wasn't terrible... but she was open to discussing it further, without running away this time.

Yes. That sounded good. After, she would have a shower, change and make a kriffing blood test to know once and for all the answer.

"Ani? Can you promise me something?"

"Anything, Angel," he replied, a bit distracted by the contract he was reading, but glancing at her with a brief smile. "What is it?"

"Never stop calling me out when I'm wrong."

Anakin frowned and placed the flimsi down. “Why is that?” Now that he was *really* looking at her, he could see that something was deeply bothering her. “What happened?”

“Just... my parents are having a silly little spat, and Mother won’t admit she’s wrong.”

He blinked. Silence. A pin could be heard dropping on the ground. “What did my mother do this time?” Anakin leaned back in his chair and rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. He swore he got whiplash.

“Ani, my mother. Jobal Thule?”

“Your parents are the sweetest couple and your mom is not like that, so, obviously, this is about my mother just like every other time,” he rolled his eyes. He thought things were better, ever since she married, Shmi had not meddled *once* in his relationship. “So why don’t you tell me what’s happening now?”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“Padmé, come on...”

“Are you?”

“Just tell me what’s wrong now,” Anakin huffed and leaned forward. “I’m not exactly bursting with free time,” he waved to his flimsi filled desk, scattered datapads and several schematics.

“Nothing is wrong!”

“Fine, then I promise I will keep calling you out when you’re wrong,” he said frazzled. “I’ll add that to the wedding vows! Happy?”

“Very.” She picked up one of the datapads, her fingers flying over it. “There. Half the problem solved, you had a schedule from last month on repeat. Unless the king of Toygerria died again?”

“Oh. Not that I know of, no. Padmé, just tell me what’s bothering you,” Anakin sighed. “I’m not dismissing you but Amedda’s execution is drawing a lot of attention. Wanted and unwanted. I have to review his every decision to make sure everything was legal and within the Imperial rights. Do you know how long he was Grand Vizier? Do you know the amount of work this is giving me and my staff? I love you, I do, but I need you to go straight to the point. At least today.”

“I can help with more of this if you want me to,” she pointed out. “But there is... one more thing you forgot to add to the schedule.”

“It’s fine, you have your own work to do. What did I miss?” He grabbed another flimsi and began reading it.

“My birthday is in three days.”

“I know, I don’t need a reminder on my calendar,” he gave her a typical Skywalker cheeky grin.

“Very funny, but you haven’t told me if we’re doing anything!”

His grin widened. "You'll just have to wait and see, won't you?"

"Oh, so it's a surprise party."

Anakin shrugged. "It could be a million of things. You'll see what it is in three days. Patience is a virtue, my love."

"Should I be going shopping?"

"If you want," he smirked. "I'm not going to tell you anything."

"You're a monster."

Anakin laughed and shook his head. "If you say so, my love, if you say so. It's just three days. It will go by in a blur."

"Well, then, I suppose I should get to work."

"If you want," he replied, repeating his words with a dazzling smile.

"Just wait till *your* birthday, I'll get you back for this."

The Emperor just snickered, clearly amused. "I love you too."

"I didn't say that!"

"It's implied," he said with a cheeky grin.

"It's implied that you're an idiot."

"Careful, or I'll hold all the birthday surprises hostage," Anakin finally got up and went around his desk to wrap his arms around her waist. "All of them," he whispered, nuzzling her cheek.

"I repeat, you're a monster."

"Maybe I'll just sleep in the guest bedroom until you decide I am a decent person again," he chuckled, kissing her forehead.

"Yes, that might be a good idea."

"Might as well, I have a ton of work to do anyway and you're too distracting," he slapped her ass and released her, going back to his seat and grabbing the flimsi again.

"*Distracting?*"

"Padmé, I really need to work. I really, really do." Anakin sighed and glanced at her. "Please? I need to focus."

"Someday, we'll share the work."

"Since someday is not today, I need to go over this on my own until the end of the night. Amedda's execution is in two days and this needs to be sorted out."

"Mon Mothma would be helpful," Padmé suggested lightly. "She's a formidable young mind, brilliant with legal matters."

"I'll take that in consideration," Anakin nodded. "Do you need anything else?"

“Just to take it back. I do love you.”

He smiled at her before throwing himself back into his work.

“I told you there would be another party.”

Shmi smiled at her husband, her beautiful, wonderful, understanding husband that did not speak about her overreaction three days ago and just hugged her not knowing why she was suddenly bawling like an infant. “My son outdid himself, the party is gorgeous.”

“And it certainly helps take people’s minds off the fact that the guest of honor was nearly assassinated by the man who was executed yesterday.”

The Queen mother winced. “Hopefully, yes. It’s Padmé’s birthday and that is what people should be focusing on. Anakin worked so hard for this party to be absolutely perfect for her, I would hate for anyone to ruin it.”

“Are you feeling better too, sweetheart?”

Nodding, she reached up to kiss his cheek. “I am. I apologize for the temporary insanity.”

“And I apologize for my... suggestion. I think little Annie Banai might be making me nostalgic, she’s a sweet little thing.”

Shmi’s hold on her husband’s hand increased. “You don’t have to apologize, honey, I think we all have baby fever. With Annie Banai, Korkie Kenobi... it’s easy to find ourselves in that position again. I always wanted to give Anakin a sibling, but I never got a chance and thinking about having a child again... it just brought out some old insecurities to the surface.”

“You’d be the one who’d have to carry a child, if that’s not something you want, I won’t force you to endure it, we can find another way. Provided it’s what we both want.”

She was tempted to reply that someone had already forced her for him but held her tongue. Shmi had gotten the result and she was pregnant. A month, only. She was carrying Cliegg’s child and she was equal parts excited and terrified. The fears she had confessed to him were still very much present. But she was pregnant and nothing would change that.

It was the way it happened. Maybe if they had spoken about it, planned for it and then have it become true... she wouldn’t have such mixed feelings.

“Thank you,” Shmi whispered quietly, leaning on his side, one hand intertwined with his and an arm around his own.

“Do you want to try teaching me how to dance again? I’ll try not to step on your feet, but I make no promises.”

Too much twirling. Her nausea was intense and she preferred to remain upright. “Maybe later, honey,” she smiled at him.

A serving droid with a tray of champagne glasses approached them. “Champagne?”

Shmi fingers itched. She could use a flute but... with a sigh, she just waved him off. “None for me, thank you.”

“Are you *sure* you’re alright?”

“Is it so weird that I’m not drinking champagne?”

“You usually have at least one glass.”

Looking down at their joined hands, she shrugged. “That’s not something I will be able to do for the foreseeable future.”

“What?” Cliegg blinked in surprise.

Biting her lip, she skimmed over the crowd with worry, but fortunately, their attentions were on the birthday party itself and they were in an isolated corner of the room, far away from the few HoloReporters present. “Alcohol is not really good for the baby. And the twirling on the dancefloor is just awful on my *all-day* sickness,” she looked up into his beautiful, dark blue eyes with a smile.

“Are you really...?”

Shmi just nodded and she felt her eyes water again. *Blasted hormones*. “Y-yes.”

Cliegg carefully placed his hands on her waist and pulled her in for a soft, sweet kiss. “I will do everything I can to make this the best possible experience for you, Shmi, I swear it.”

She held onto his shoulders, her hands fisting his lapels and just hiccuped as she began crying and nodding at the same time, trying to be discreet. The last thing she wanted was the holonet to capture this moment or to have someone noticing her awful state and report back to Anakin. “I know. I know,” she whispered and sniffed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I love you. And this child.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “Stop,” she whined and buried her face in his chest, arms going inside his jacket and around his waist as she cried quietly, probably staining his shirt with salty tears. His sweetness was just making a rush of hormones go through her.

“Never, love.” Shmi laughed through her tears, which didn’t seem to want to slow down, there was just so much on her mind she wanted to say, or share, but the only thing she was able to do was cry. “Why don’t we go get you some fresh air, Padmé and Anakin will be arriving at any moment. We wouldn’t want to steal the attention away from them.”

Shmi pulled away. “It’s a good idea,” she whispered, cleaning her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“See? I’m learning how to handle this political life,” he teased with a smile as one of his hands moved to her back, guiding her to the edge of the ballroom.

Leaning into him, Shmi realized that one of her biggest fears, still unspoken, was unfounded. She might have been completely abandoned and alone during one pregnancy, but this time, it was different. Cliegg loved her and their child. It was not a way of gaining power, there was no hidden agenda or twisted plans. Just pure love and dedication and she knew they were going to be alright...

Across the way, at the top of the grand staircase, the double doors opened, revealing Padmé in a spectra-faded gown of pale pink, lilac, turquoise and yellow. Her hair was loose,

sprinkled with pink crystals and she was smiling so radiantly, it was almost blinding. At her side, Anakin wore a simple, but elegant navy blue three-piece suit, white shirt and carefully crafted cufflinks. His collar was open which gave him a younger and more relaxed look. Padmé was the star of the party, not him. He would gladly stay in her shadow for the entire night.

“Wow, I’m very surprised,” she teased as she placed her arm in his.

Anakin laughed, there was a secretive twinkle in his eyes as he looked over at his beautiful consort. “The night is young, Angel, many things can happen but I hope you like and enjoy the party,” he placed a hand over hers and leaned to kiss the corner of her lips. “You look absolutely divine... and ravishing.”

“You’re not allowed to tear this dress off until the party’s over,” she teased coyly, leaning in so she could whisper in his ear, “which might be difficult, considering I’m not wearing any underwear.”

Anakin almost missed a step at her words, turning to her with a hungry expression. “Now that’s just mean, do you realize how many *hours* I have to wait until I can rip it off?” He was whining but he didn’t care. “You’re just making me want to rush through all the wonderful surprises I have prepared for you.”

“It’s my birthday, I should be allowed to do whatever I want.”

He chuckled. “You are absolutely right. What is the first thing you want to do, Angel?”

“Surprise me,” she answered, running a finger along his bicep with a cheeky little smile. “You said you had a lot, and I’m curious. You wouldn’t want to disappoint me, would you?”

Anakin had a main surprise prepared, but he didn’t want to do it right away and he was waiting for the literal fireworks. He would make her suffer a little while longer because what he was going to do had to be incredibly special. “Why don’t we start with those two little surprises coming our way?” He smirked.

“Auntie Padmé! Auntie Padmé!” Pooja and Ryoo came rushing their way in a blur of white and pink lace dresses. They hugged Padmé by the waist with huge grins. “Happy birthday!” They chorused.

He had told her that her family couldn’t come and spend her birthday with them. Going so far as to have the Nabberies record a holo wishing her a happy birthday and “regretting” not being able to travel to Imperial Center.

“You’re here!” Padmé gasped, bending down to return the hug. “Oh my goodness, you sneaky little things!”

“Uncle Anakin made us promise not to tell,” Ryoo whispered before looking at Anakin smugly. “Did we do it right?”

He winked at them. “You were the perfect little spies. Your Aunt did not suspect one thing!” Behind the girls, Padmé’s parents, sister, and brother-in-law approached with more ease than the two little ones.

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart!” Jobal wished with a big smile as she waited for the girls to release Padmé so she could give her a hug. “Anakin is a very good surprise planner, I can tell

you that. Oh, we're so happy for you!" She gushed as Ruwee smiled secretively.

"He is something, dear. Happy Birthday," Ruwee came after his wife, hugging his daughter, maybe tighter than what he intended. "Such a big night for my little girl."

"Daddy, don't be like that," Padmé sighed, rolling her eyes. "I'm in my twenties and a Senator. Hardly a baby anymore."

"Someday, you'll understand," Jobal teased.

"Don't you start too!"

"Once you become a parent, your children will always be your babies," Ruwee pointed out. 'Even if they don't like it,' he chuckled. "You're so beautiful, sweetheart."

"Always the favorite child," Sola snickered from behind her parents.

"Oh, nonsense," Padmé scoffed. "They bought you a house when you got married."

"They gave you Varykino after you stopped being Queen!"

"You're still allowed to use it!"

"Oh, am I, your majesty?"

"Girls, please," Jobal rolled her eyes. "Behave. You're in front of the Emperor. What kind of education will he think we gave you both?"

"The Emperor knows full well just how deep my imperfections run, Mother," Padmé retorted, standing up to lean against Anakin. "And yet here we are."

"Yes, we are, it's not like she gave me a lot of choice," he sighed dramatically, smirking down at her. "Padmé can be very persuasive when she wants to be."

"Hmph," Ruwee grumbled, looking away as he took a drink from his wine glass. "I'd rather not think about that."

"I am sure Anakin meant politically speaking," Sola smirked. "Didn't you, your majesty?"

Anakin laughed. "Yes, she can argue me to death, that's for sure."

"Anakin, darling, please... Shut up."

"You have to be nice to me, Angel, or I will hold my surprises hostage," Anakin chuckled, amused.

"*You* have to be nice to me, it's my birthday."

"My surprises," he nuzzled her cheek, before giving her a chaste kiss. "What if I find my mother and have you all mingle, while Padmé and I do a round around her guests?" Anakin suggested and looked around the ballroom. "Not really sure where she is though..."

"With your stepfather, probably," Padmé said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "They'll find her, don't worry. Just dance with me."

Anakin nodded and took her hand, leading her to the dance floor, where he twirled her before bringing her into his arms. "Did you like your first surprise?"

"I'll admit it, you're good," she conceded with a smile. "But a small part of me was rather expecting something... bigger, given how you've been playing tonight up."

"Bigger?" He repeated and made her take another twirled under his arm. 'Like fireworks?' Chuckling, he brought her to his embrace and kissed her cheek. "This party is huge, you know how long it took me to organize it? I gathered dozens of people that were helped by Amidala's Crusade tonight, to honor you. I may or may not have literal fireworks waiting. What else can I do for you, my love?" Anakin teased.

"Full access to the treasury?" she joked. "I could go for another shopping spree."

"I can take you on a shopping spree myself. The Council would have a heart attack if they knew you spent the treasury on dresses I would only rip to shreds later," he said smugly.

"I'm on the Council, I can soothe some ruffled feathers," Padmé countered, leaning in to kiss his cheek. "Except Yoda."

"No one can sooth that old green crone," Anakin muttered annoyed. "But, I hope that even if, apparently, I am not living up to your expectations, you're still having fun."

"The only reason my expectations are so high is because you raised the bar, my love."

"Next time, I'll set up a holomovie and some candy and spend the night cuddling in our bedroom," he shrugged and looked disappointed.

"Perfect. Just like this is perfect. Really, Ani. All of this is amazing," Padmé squeezed his hand. "I have never been happier or felt luckier."

"I'll do better next year, I promise. Make it up for your missed expectations. I think I got too excited."

"Did you not hear what I just said?"

Anakin smiled and kissed her. "I did. I love you."

"I love you too. And this is already the best birthday of my life."

"I'm happy to hear that. Do you want to mingle? There is a lot of people waiting to wish you a happy birthday!"

"If you'll stay with me."

"Always."

"Right, then let's go mingle. Quickly. I don't like sharing you."

Anakin grinned. "Do you know I love when you are possessive?" He asked rhetorically, as he saw Bail Organa and his wife, Queen Breha of Alderaan, approach them. "Let the mingle begin," he whispered.

After the Organas, they greeted and spoke with many others and Anakin made an effort to put Padmé on the spotlight and let him have a ore stand-by role. It was her day, her party and her guests. They were all there for her. He would only interject when she would get too deep into an political argument and they already had their work to discuss it, they didn't need their leisure time to be occupied with the same affairs. He kept glancing at Cody and Rex, who

were controlling the security of the ballroom, and when Rex signaled to the balcony, he knew his last surprise of the night was finally ready.

“Angel, I have been sharing you for hours, will you come with me outside for a little fresh air? Please?”

“Gladly, there are benches out there too, right?” Padmé asked, bending her knees a little. “My feet are killing me.”

“Would anyone really notice if you took your heels off?” He chuckled as he took her hand and walked them out into the empty balcony that faced one of the quiet sides of Imperial Center.

“Was that a height joke?”

“You know I love our height difference,” he replied. Behind him and discreetly, Rex and Cody closed the doors. “I wouldn’t dream of making fun of you, Angel, I would much too scared.”

“Glad to know I still have that going for me.”

Anakin took her to the benches facing the railing of the balcony. the sky was pitch black and the noises of Imperial Center were almost muted. “This is peaceful,” he sighed as he sat down.

“For the most part,” she agreed, sitting down and removing the white silk slippers she was wearing. “It’s never truly quiet though, is it?”

“No. Especially not for the second surprise,” he leaned into her and kissed the corner of her lips. ‘Happy birthday, my love.’ Suddenly, in the pitch dark skies, several fireworks illuminated the sky with a wide array of colors. “For you.” Anakin grinned and pointed at the beautiful scheme of colors decorating the skies.

“Oh, Ani, they’re beautiful,” Padmé whispered, covering her mouth with her fingers to hide the ‘o’ of surprise. “You didn’t have to...”

When she looked at him again, he wasn’t sitting down, but he was down in one knee, holding a beautiful white, velvet box with a stunning ring nestled into silk. It was made of the best materials the Galaxy could offer, with a lilac moonstone surrounded by several diamonds. “You wanted bigger,” he grinned at her.

“Ani...” Padmé gasped again. “Really?”

He laughed. “Will you give me the honor of being my wife, my Empress, my equal?”

“I...” He raised his free hand to stop her.

“*You* have changed my life from the moment we’ve met. I was never the same or would have wanted to be because you made me the man I am today and for that, I will be forever grateful. The hardships we endure only served to prove that we will resist anything that is going to be thrown our way. I know I couldn’t be Emperor without you. I couldn’t be who I am today if you hadn’t stayed by my side. You are the love of my life and the reason I wake up every morning. I want to wake up by your side for the rest of my life. I want you to be the mother of my children. I want you to help me lead this Empire into greatness. I want *you*. All

of you. With your imperfect perfection. So, I repeat, will you give me the honor of spending the rest of your life, at my side?"

"Don't say anything else or I'll cry and it'll ruin my makeup," Padmé finally managed to find her voice. "Yes, yes, of course I will. There's nothing I've ever wanted more than this."

Anakin grinned and took the ring out of the box as he stood to his full height and slid the ring onto her finger. "You have made me the happiest man on the Galaxy," he whispered before his lips came down on hers, kissing her passionately as the fireworks kept blowing up the sky with colors and sounds.

16. Morning After

"I still can't believe you all came."

"Of course we came," Yané said, spreading butter over her toast with a smile. "We weren't going to miss your birthday, especially not when it came with an Imperial invitation. And the chance to meet handsome soldiers and nobles and such."

"Yané!" Saché squealed, blushing. "You shouldn't say such things!"

Yané shrugged, grinning as she took a bite of her toast.

"We're happy you took the time to be apart from your cute Emperor to have breakfast with us, Padmé," Dormé chuckled as she took a sip of fresh juice. "We do miss you back on Naboo, you know."

"Anakin and I were there recently, but it's something of a delicate matter," Padmé pointed out, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"Because of Palo?" Sabé asked rather pointedly. "I had a run in with him recently, in Moenia. He was sodding drunk and called me by your name and said I was a two-faced harlot."

"Yes, he did not accept your separation very well," Rabé added. "He's very bitter about it. I had the displeasure of running into him one or two times."

"He's not entirely wrong to be upset," Padmé conceded. "But I don't know how I would even fix things between the two of us, he was the one who chose to end things."

"You can't solve everything," Teckla said, bouncing Annie on her knee. "Isn't that right, baby?"

Annie gurgled and giggled as she played with a spoon. "She's adorable, Teckla," Yané gushed. "Takes after you. How is Kitster handling the father role?"

"He's great. Even lets me get sleep some nights," Teckla laughed as she pulled one of her daughter's bottles from her purse and adjusted Annie for feeding. "I was guilting him for most of the pregnancy, though."

"I think the father role is a role that suits every man," Rabé pointed out. "Let's admit it. Nothing is more adorable than a good man with his child and being completely absorbed into a little life you helped create," she said dreamily.

"Someone's projecting," Yané teased. "Best get yourself a husband. Maybe then you can see about the baby."

Rabé made a face at her friend and took a bite of her own toast. Dormé's startled gasp made everyone around the table stop and look at her. "Padmé! Is that... oh, Shiraya's word, *it is!*" Quickly, she grabbed Padmé's hand, bringing it to the center of the table so all the girls could see the delicate piece of jewelry. "You're engaged?"

"I was wondering how long it would take you to notice," Padmé said with a grin. "Ani proposed last night during the fireworks."

The girls let out a collective sigh of envy and adoration as they each took a turn staring at the ring. "It's stunning," Sabé breathed. "Your young Emperor has good taste. It's delicate, unique, simple. It's you."

"I agree," Padmé nodded with a smile. "And I'm *very* relieved that he didn't give me the same one he gave Princess Amee. That would have been awkward."

"He might be blonde but I don't think he's stupid," Yané snorted. "But you know, I heard a rumor that the Princess of Aquilae has found love in a commoner? Quite the scandal in her planet."

"What would be of you without rumors?" Sabé rolled her eyes. "If the Princess has found love, then she deserves it after the spectacle that was her engagement with the Emperor."

"Everyone deserves love," Padmé added. "I just... I hope I can reconcile with my future mother-in-law."

"Yes, that spat you two had was *ghastly*," Dormé agreed.

"How is that going, anyway?" Sabé questioned. "Did it go better with her marriage to the Ambassador of Tatooine or not really?"

"It's... complicated," Padmé sighed. "She kept trying to apologize for meddling to break us up by meddling to accelerate our relationship. She even tried to get me pregnant by switching my contraceptives for fertility supplements."

"So you *are*..." Saché looked scandalized and a little bit nauseous. "Oh, Padmé, *no*."

"I know, I know, it goes against everything we were ever taught, but he's the only person I've ever been with. I swear."

"You're not pregnant, are you?" Dormé sighed, rubbing her forehead. "If you are, I'm sure we can get you married by tomorrow. Use us while you have us."

"I'm not pregnant!" Padmé insisted. "I got rid of the supplements before I could ingest them! And we're more careful than Teckla and Kitster were."

"Hey!" Teckla scowled.

"The evidence is sitting in your lap, dear."

"Still, cheap shot. Yes, contraceptives failed us, but you know, Annie is the best thing in my life and I'm happy it happened the way it did. I wouldn't trade her for a *perfect* scenario," she said as she kissed her daughter's forehead.

"Anyway, how did it unfold with your mother-in-law? Did you two had a row? Did Anakin intercede? Honestly, the Galaxy is always looking forward to the next fight when you two are together in an event. Which is not a very good sign," Sabé grimaced.

"She was giving Cliegg the brush-off because Anakin and I weren't moving our relationship forward, and I told her off for it," Padmé explained. "And since then, we've

just.... Avoided each other mostly.” She was not about to break her word and tell them about Shmi’s pregnancy, or her part in creating it.

“Is that how you’re going to live for the rest of your lives?” Dormé asked. “You’re marrying her son, you’re living under the same roof. You won’t be able to avoid each other forever.”

“Why doesn’t she move?” Yané asked.

“Yané!” Sabé cried out. “There you go again. We’re talking about the Queen mother!”

“Who is retired and already married. She could leave Padmé and Anakin alone after everything she has done,” Yané defended. “It’s the least she could do for them.”

“I am not going to make a family tear itself apart over me,” Padmé insisted. “I just need to give her a little more time.”

“Does she know about the engagement?” Sabé asked. “You can try and bond over the wedding preparations. Anakin is her only son, I’m sure she will want to be involved. It could be a nice opportunity for you two to spend some time together. I don’t think she’s a bad person. Her actions are uncalled for yes, but... you know, I kind of feel sorry for her life story. Her husband dies and leaves her, barely twenty, with a baby and an Empire. It had to be difficult.”

“Her husband was a corrupt old monster,” Padmé pointed out. “But I think it’s Anakin’s place to tell her.”

“She hasn’t been having some very good days, has she?” Teckla frowned. “A few days ago, she passed by me and was a wreck. Nearly bit my head off when I asked her what was wrong. I figured you two had fought again and let her be.”

“I offered to help her, and she said to leave her alone,” Padmé sighed. “It’s becoming an ugly cycle.”

“I believe that it will improve with the wedding,” Sabé said. “When will Anakin tell her?”

“Well, he was having breakfast with her, Cliegg, Owen and Beru, so today, probably?” Padmé paused to take a drink of her tea.

“Here’s to hoping,” Dormé raised her glass and took a sip.

Cliegg had left to meet with Owen and Beru to take them to breakfast, and Shmi was left to prepare alone and with time. Over the short period her husband had known about the pregnancy, he had become even more loving and devoted and Shmi could only smile as she thought about the excitement in his eyes. It was endearing and it eased some of her current fears. There was a knock on the door as she finished placing her earrings and as she allowed her visitor to enter, she saw Anakin strut in, oozing confidence and happiness, through the mirror.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she greeted with a smile.

“Hello, Mom,” he came behind her and kissed her head. ‘You look beautiful. Can I tell you that I miss you?’ Anakin chuckled as he wrapped one arm around her. “You’ve been mostly hiding for the past week and I was so wrapped up with Amedda’s execution and Padmé’s birthday that I feel like I neglected to check on you,” he said guiltily. “Thankfully, I can trust Cliegg to look after you, but still...”

“It’s fine, Ani, you were busy,” Shmi said, smiling graciously, tugging him down to kiss his cheek. “It only makes sense, given your position. When you were a very little boy, you used to be worried I’d disappeared forever any time I was gone for more than an hour.”

“You were everything to me, I didn’t want to be alone,” he confessed quietly. “I was scared that you would be taken from me.”

“I know. Eventually, I had to bring you to Senate meetings. You’d fall asleep on my lap.”

“I was getting sleep while I could. I knew one day I couldn’t sleep during those meetings,” Anakin chuckled. ‘I know you went a little crazy when I met Padmé, but you are still the best mom in the Galaxy and I can only be grateful for how you’ve raised me,’ he kissed her cheek. “I wish you and Padmé would get along, you know?”

“I know...” she sighed. “Let’s just go join the rest of our family for breakfast, shall we?”

“Is there something I can do to make it happen?” Anakin insisted. “You are both the most important women in my life and I don’t want to spend the rest of my days dreading the next time you are at each other’s throats.”

Shmi hesitated. “We’ll figure it out eventually.”

Anakin sighed. “I’m tired of hearing that.”

“Ani...”

“You’re right. We should go meet with the rest of the family,” he said, sounding a bit more upbeat. “Padmé won’t be joining us, she is having breakfast with the girls. At least we know we won’t have an awkward meal. Shall we?” He offered his arm to his mother.

“We shall.” She stood and took his hand instead, squeezing it fondly. “I’m sure we’ll find a way to make it awkward regardless, nearly everyone got quite drunk last night.”

“It was a celebration, it’s natural,” Anakin chuckled.

“I’m sure, it was almost worse than after your coronation.”

“I don’t think we will manage to top that. Kitster was a lot less drunk, given that he’s a responsible parent nowadays,” he laughed. “How about you and Cliegg? How drunk were you two because I didn’t see a lot of you for the rest of the night.”

“Oh no, we were making sure no one made any trouble. Someone had to be the adult in the room, after all.” She deliberately omitted how meeting the little Naberrie girls had made her more than a little weepy.

“There you two are,” Cliegg said as he stood and pulled a chair for Shmi. “Sweetheart.”

“Good morning, your majesty,” Beru said from where she was already sitting, taking a bite out of a piece of bacon.

"Please, no formalities," Anakin said. "We're family," he said as he shook hands with Owen and leaned down to kiss Beru's cheek.

"It feels weird calling you Anakin though," she whispered timidly. "You're still the Emperor."

"I'm also your brother-in-law," he said.

"Anakin is right. We're family and formalities are not needed," Shmi said, supporting her son. "How long will you two be staying this time?"

"I don't know, are Anakin and Padmé finally going to elope?" Owen teased. "We all know it's only a matter of time, little brother."

"Since you've mentioned that, *big brother*," Anakin started with a chuckle and looked around the table. 'I have an announcement to make,' he said slowly. "I proposed to Padmé last night and she said yes. We're getting married," he finished with a huge grin.

"Finally!" his stepfamily said in unison.

Anakin rolled his eyes. "Those are the words of encouragement a groom wants to hear."

"We knew it was only a matter of time, honestly, I thought it was going to get to the point where Padmé had to propose to *you*," Owen said, still smirking. "It's always been obvious how in love the two of you are."

"We are happy with the pace that we took and what matter is that we are finally preparing to walk down the aisle and get married. No interruptions, no excuses. This is it," Anakin grinned. 'You're staying until the wedding,' he pointed at Owen and Beru. "I won't take 'no' for an answer."

"How long is it going to be until then? We do still have duties on Tatooine," Beru interjected.

"Maybe you can commute," Cliegg suggested. "You will be spending more time with us and we really would like to have you two around some more."

"Mom, you're eerily quiet," Anakin frowned. "I thought you would be the first one to leap with joy."

"I'm glad you're ready to take this step together," Shmi replied, "but I don't think there's anything more I need to say."

"Maybe you and Padmé can plan the wedding together?" Anakin suggested. "Bond over the preparations, get closer. At least, try and do it for me. I know she'll make an effort."

Shmi looked over at Cliegg, silently asking his advice. Cliegg took her hand and kissed her knuckles. *Whatever you wish to do, sweetheart, I'll support you.*

"I might not be the most available wedding planner, Ani. I'll be a little busy with my own big event."

"I don't follow," Anakin said, confused.

"Isn't one wedding event enough for the two of you?" Owen teased his father.

“Oh, this isn’t for a marriage,” Shmi corrected. “It’s for a baby.”

“Baby?” All but Cliegg chorused.

“Your fiancée can be as sneaky as me,” Shmi told Anakin with a dry little smile. “She chose to return the fertility supplements I gave her in an unexpected way.”

“Padmé did what?” Anakin asked, scandalized. ‘Mom... you’re... you’re really pregnant?’ He looked to Cliegg and back to Shmi. “How... how are you feeling?”

“How far along, Shmi?” Beru asked.

“Just a month. And don’t be angry with Padmé on my behalf, Ani. Force knows I’ve done that enough already this last week.”

Anakin pursed his lips. “I’ll speak with her later. But you didn’t answer my question. How are you feeling?”

“Is this something that was planned?” Owen asked. “Or that you two spoke about?”

“We had no idea until I started getting morning sickness. But everything is fine, really. Nothing out of the ordinary for a pregnancy.”

“Then...” Beru started as she glanced between Anakin and Owen, before settling her gaze in the older couple. “Congratulations are officially in order!”

“Obviously!” Owen chuckled. “I can’t believe I’m getting a baby sibling at this age.”

“Yes, me either,” Anakin smiled softly as he squeezed his mother’s hand. His question wasn’t fully answered, he wanted to know how she was feeling about it all happening like this. “I’m really happy about the two of you. This baby will have the greatest parents and family, in the Galaxy.”

“Hope it’s a girl,” Owen interjected.

“Oh, that would be adorable,” Anakin replied cheekily.

“And good practice,” Beru added with a smile. “Babysitting is always an option for us.”

“It will be a new playmate for Annie and Korkie,” he chuckled.

“We should eat, I’m sure all of us are starving, especially my pregnant wife,” Cliegg laughed as he kissed Shmi’s temple. ‘This is why I want you two to stick around for longer,’ he turned to his son. “Be present for this moment.”

“We’d be happy to stay, Dad. This is incredible,” Owen promised before kissing his wife on the cheek. “Looks like I get to take you shopping a lot, huh?”

“Send her with Padmé,” Anakin quipped. “They’ll have fun together, I’m sure.”

“That might be something all three of us could do, actually,” Shmi suggested. ‘I’m not wearing maternity clothes from twenty years ago.’ Everyone shared a laugh at that, but Shmi reached out and took Anakin’s hand. “It took a little while, Ani, but I’m alright. This isn’t exactly something I planned, but we’re doing it. And I’m not afraid.”

“We’re all here for you,” he smiled, squeezing her hand. “For anything you might need. I love you and I’m happy I have the chance to be an older brother.”

“You’ll be an incredible one,” his mother promised.

“So, how did your mother take the news?”

“She congratulated us, but she didn’t jump up and down in glee as I kind of was expecting,” Anakin started. “Then I understood why,” he crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you mind telling me what went through your head when you gave her fertility boosters?”

“My thought was that she would realize what they were before she took them and understand what it feels like,” Padmé mumbled, looking down like a guilty child. “Of course, I also thought I would only be gone for a week.”

“Listen, I don’t condone what she did, at all. It was manipulative but we are young. I know that kids were definitely in our future. If it had happened, we would have handled it. My mom is in her forties and you’re lucky this is something Cliegg also wants. I am worried about her, she’s adjusting to this new curve of her life and honestly, I expected you to be better,” he ranted. “Do you know how dangerous pregnancies at this age are?” Anakin sighed.

“Not actually that dangerous, because this is the Center of the Galactic Empire, with the best medical care in the galaxy, and your mother is a very healthy woman?” Padmé shot back defensively. “I tried to apologize, I offered to help her as soon as I figured out what was going on, but she wouldn’t let me!”

“Obviously!” Anakin pointed out. “If the roles were reversed, would you have wanted her help?”

“Don’t lecture me, I’ve had to keep this a secret and deal with the consequences all week!”

“Well, you’re not the one who’s pregnant!” Anakin ran a hand through his hair. “However, she did offer to go with you and Beru shopping so I hope you both can start from there.”

“Ani, I really didn’t mean to do any harm, I swear.”

“No, you meant to boost my mother’s fertility for fun,” he rolled his eyes. “What’s done is done, let’s just hope she has a relaxed pregnancy with no complications.”

“I told you, she wasn’t supposed to actually take it,” Padmé sulked.

“It was a very big gamble,” Anakin pointed out.

“Blame Mas Amedda for trying to kill me!”

“Fine, Padmé, what’s done is done and I’ll have a baby sibling in seven months. I’m just not happy about how you went about things and I know my mother is processing all of this. What I want right now is for you two to be able to move forward and have a courteous relationship. Kriff, I’m not even asking you to become friends,” Anakin argued.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’m going to try from now on, really, I will.”

Anakin sighed and then wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her forehead. “I believe you,” he mumbled. “How did the girls react?”

“They’re very excited. Demanded to know when the ceremony would be,” Padmé admitted, leaning back into their bed. “As if we’ve had time to plan everything.”

“We can schedule it for as soon as possible. Possibly before my baby brother or sister is born.”

“I suppose part of it depends on how big of an event we want to make it, doesn’t it?” she pointed out. “I don’t really care about the flashy stuff.”

“It’s our wedding, we’ll do it for us and not for the Galaxy. I don’t need a three-day event, surrounded by HoloReporters. It can be our closest friends and family. As long as I marry you, Padmé, I’m the happiest man in the Galaxy.”

“Then maybe I should just see how long it would take for me to get a dress,” she teased.

“I’ll try very hard not to rip it on our wedding night so you can save it for our daughter one day,” Anakin chuckled. ‘Have you spoken with your family? They are aware I was going to propose. I did ask for your father’s permission, that is why he was so emotional yesterday.’ He grinned. “I love you, Padmé Naberrie, I can’t wait until we’re married.”

“I love you too, and I will go tell them right now if you want.”

“Go, I’ll handle a public statement to announce our engagement to the Galaxy,” he pecked her lips. “Then we can spend all day in bed,” he whispered brushing his lips across her jaw.

17. Surprises

Padmé tapped her fingers against her desk as she waited for the call to connect to its first recipient. “Come on,” she muttered. “Pick up.”

Shmi was humming a lullaby to Rhia, her beautiful five-month-old daughter, when she heard her comm ring insistently. Sighing, she bent over the crib and laid the baby down, caressing the small strands of brown hair that grew on Rhia’s little head. She smiled at the sleeping figure and took a few moments to pull away from the crib. She never knew happiness like this could exist.

“Yes, yes, I am here, what is it?” she sighed tiredly, as she answered, sitting down on an armchair, legs curling up underneath her. Cliegg was delayed with work, and only the Force would know how anxious he was to get home to her. To their daughter. He was the most dedicated father and loving husband she could ever hope for. He made her entire pregnancy feel like a dream and *he* was the one that’s usually always up at night, unless it was for feeding hours.

“I didn’t wake her, did I?” Padmé asked worriedly. “I’m sorry, I can call back.”

“No, no, nonsense dear, she was already asleep like a little angel. Oh, she’s so much easier to put to sleep than Anakin was. He was in a constant sugar rush, it would seem,” Shmi chuckled fondly at the memory and she was happy that her relationship with her daughter-in-law had improved. “What can I do for you, your majesty?”

“Oh, Force, do not call me that!”

“If I recall, you and Anakin have been married for close to nine months? You were crowned Empress, my dear.”

“I know, but we’re family now.”

“I was just teasing you, Padmé,” Shmi chuckled. “I do that now,” she added snickering.

“Ugh....” Padmé rolled her eyes. “I wanted to ask if I could borrow Rhia for tomorrow afternoon?”

Shmi frowned. “You want another child of mine?” she sighed dramatically. “Having one isn’t good enough for you? You need both?”

“It’s a surprise for Anakin.”

“What kind of surprise could involve a five-month-old?”

“Guess,” Padmé said with a smirk.

Shmi had to muffle her squeal of excitement as to not wake her daughter. “Oh, I knew it was a matter of time! How far along are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Padmé said innocently.” I just want to spend time with my sister-in-law.”

“Yes, I imagine you two have a *lot* in common,” Shmi drawled out. “Fine, you can borrow my daughter. I’ll distract Cliegg so he doesn’t get separation anxiety.”

“Thank you, Shmi. We won’t keep her long, she’ll be back before nap time.” Padmé ended the call and pulled up Teckla’s channel next.

“Hello?” Teckla answered to the call and in the background, Padmé could hear the gleeful giggles and laughter of the almost two-year-old Annie playing with her toys.

“Hi. Do you want a day off from the miniature storm?”

“Yes!” Teckla answered with a bit too much enthusiasm. “I love my daughter. I do. So much. But I need a day to myself and since Kitster is away in business, the babysitting duties are yours.”

Padmé smiled. “You won’t regret it. I’ll send one of my handmaidens to pick her up first thing in the morning. I have to call the Mandalorian Embassy before Obi-Wan and Satine leave.”

“What exactly are you planning to do tomorrow, Padmé?”

“Just a little playdate.”

“Uh... well, you can tell me all about it after I pick up Annie and I am well relaxed and taken care of by one of the best Imperial spas.” Teckla quipped.

“Right.” Padmé smiled. “Goodbye! See you tomorrow!” She ended the transmission and entered the Mandalorian frequency.

“Hello?” Obi-Wan’s tired voice came through the comm.

“Lord Consort, how are you?”

“If it isn’t the Empress herself,” Obi-Wan chuckled. “Oh, tired, Korkie has so much energy that sometimes it’s just difficult to keep up with him, but thankfully, he’s napping at the moment and so is my wife. What can I do for you, my dear?”

“Would you like it if we took Korkie off your hands for a day? Say, tomorrow?”

“I would have to see it with Satine, but I think there will not be a problem. Is there a specific reason for this request? Or do you just need to tire Anakin? Because, Korkie just learned how to *run* and it’s is very... *fun*.”

“I’m giving Anakin a day off from royal duties,” she explained with a little smile. “It’s going to be wonderful.”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “A day off with Korkie? It’s not a day off,” he snickered.

“Obi-Wan, *please*?”

“Alright, alright, I don’t think we can say no to a day off ourselves.”

“Thank you! I promise, it’ll be worth it!”

“Ani, sweetheart, wake up.”

Anakin groaned. “I thought it was my day off?”

“It is. And it’s almost lunchtime,” she chided. “Come on, darling, I have a surprise for you.”

“Ay-uh!” A tiny hand smacked his face. “Ay-uh!” *Ani, up!* He heard in his head.

He was *wide* awake now. And little Annie Banai was staring right at him. “I’m up, I’m up, you demanding little one.” He proceeded to tickle her sides.

“Noooo!” Annie shrieked, running in circles around the bed while Padmé bounced baby Rhia on her hip.

“Korkie Kryze is on his way as we speak. We’re having a playdate.”

“Oh, are we?” Anakin smiled as he extended his arms, silently asking for his baby sister to be handed to him. “I thought it was my day off?” He teased.

“There’s another surprise too,” Padmé said with a smile.

Anakin blew a raspberry at Rhia, making the baby giggle. “Is it a special date? Oh Force, it is, isn’t it? I forgot, haven’t I?” He made a horrified face as his sister tried to stick her little hand in his mouth.

“No, no special occasions,” Padmé laughed. “Just come on, let’s get to the playroom. Annie, come here.” She grabbed the toddler’s hand as she ran past her.

“What do you think she’s up to, Rhia?” His baby sister looked serious for a moment before exploding in a fit of giggles and he just laughed. “I guess we’ll see,” he kissed her chubby cheeks and cradled her to his chest before leaving the bed.

Korkie Kryze was already in the playroom, kicking C-3P0’s legs and laughing. “Bang bang bang!” he shouted.

“Korkie, that is not nice,” Anakin said sternly.

“Thank you, Master Ani,” Threepio said gratefully.

“Uh-oh,” Annie giggled as she jumped into a pile of pillows, grabbing one of the stuffed animals nearby. Padmé smiled.

“So’y,” Korkie mumbled sheepishly before running after Annie and grabbing another stuffed animal and the two of them began an invisible war, in their invisible world.

Anakin bounced Rhia and marvelled at how his baby sister was intuitive and quiet, big blue eyes observing the two older kids. “Any reason why we are on babysitting duty? I don’t mind. I like spending time with them,” he sat down next to his wife and kissed her cheek.

“Maybe,” Padmé said, smiling as she picked up a toy shaak and wiggled it in Rhia’s face. “It might have something to do with the surprise.”

Rhia shrieked with delight and tried to grab the toy. “You keep talking about a surprise,” he laughed watching his baby sister. “When will I know about the *surprise*?”

“When I decide you’re ready.” Padmé handed Rhia the toy, only for the baby to immediately put it in her mouth.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine, fine, be like that,” Rhia vibrated with happiness as she chewed on the toy and then shrieked as she pulled away only to start chewing in another place. ‘Force, she is so adorable,’ Anakin said with a huge grin. “You know, it makes me think...” he starts shyly.

“Think about what?” Padmé asked innocently.

“It’s normal stuff,” he shrugged. “I mean, it seems everyone around us have a baby but us and you know, we’re married and it gets me thinking sometimes.”

“Is that so?” Padmé started to smile.

“I wonder how our kids are going to look like,” he admitted with a soft blush.

“Well, we’ll find out in about five months,” she said, the smile growing larger.

Anakin just stared at her for a few minutes, trying to decipher her words, but as the words began settling in and the realization dawned on him, his eyes grew wide and he looked from her stomach to her face. Several times. “Oh... oh, so you mean... you’re... we’re... *really*?”

“Mhmmm.” Padmé tucked back one of Annie’s curls. “Times two. Surprise.”

“Times two?” He repeated as Rhia began getting agitated in his lap. He focused on his wife and the energy she carried. “*Twins*?” Anakin cried out excited. “Force, Padmé, this is...” since he had no words, he leaned forward and crashed his lips against hers, pulling her into a breathtaking kiss, interrupted by an angry shriek from Rhia.

Padmé pressed a hand to his cheek. “Time to practice.”

“I don’t think I ever loved you as much as I do right now,” Anakin said as he bounced Rhia and gave her back the toy shaak she had dropped.

“Really? Not even our wedding day?”

“You know I love you more and more each day,” he replied with a smile. “You keep giving me reasons to fall in love with you all over again.”

“I love you too. And I think we’re going to make amazing parents,” she said, reaching out to stop the redheaded Mandalorian boy as he reached for her hair. “Korkie, no.”

“Well, we have enough practice,” he snickered.

“Your mother already knows, by the way. She figured it out when I asked to borrow Rhia.”

“She has a sixth sense for these things,” Anakin laughed.

“And she’s been hoping for it for way too long,” Padmé pointed out. “You have no idea how long I’ve been hiding my cravings.”

“How long have you known?” He asked as he made funny faces at his sister, making her giggle and shake her arms excitedly. He grinned down at the baby and kissed her chubby cheeks, Rhia reaching up to grab a fistful of his hair while blowing a raspberry at him.

“About two months,” Padmé admitted. “You haven’t noticed my waistlines getting higher?”

Anakin pulled his sister away from his hair and shrugged. “I may have noticed something but I didn’t think it was worth mentioning,” he said slowly. He was not the kind of man to tell his wife that she was gaining weight. But he did feel incompetent not getting suspicious, after all, he was Force sensitive and now that he had connected to the little ones growing inside of her, it was impossible to ignore their presence. He knew he has been exhausted lately, being an Emperor was not easy and having Padmé to share the workload only increased it, to both of them. “Wait... you know for *two* months and you’re only telling me *now*?”

“I wanted to be sure. And to get past the first trimester,” she explained calmly. “Sola said that was the hardest to get through safely.”

“You could have told me, you know I would be there no matter what. It could have been our little secret,” he said. “Next time, you’ll tell me immediately, promise? I want to be part of it from the first moment.”

“I promise.”

He smiled and leaned towards, kissing her lips. Annie and Korkie let out a collective gagging sound and Anakin pulled away, rolling his eyes. “Alright, you little rugrats, time to play rough,” he passed Rhia to Padmé and stood up, Annie and Korkie screeched in delight and began fleeing from their Uncle, who had as much energy as they did and began chasing them around the room.

Padmé laughed as she watched them, bouncing Rhia on her knee. “I hope my babies are as well-behaved as you are, little sister,” she teased. “But if they’re anything like your brother, I probably won’t be so lucky.”

18. Back Where We Began

“Moouooooom!”

“Daaaaaaaddy!”

“Do you want to take this one?” Padmé asked as she compared earrings in the mirror. “Or just pretend we can’t hear them?”

“We’re growing old, we lose some of our hearing capacity. From my end, I didn’t hear a thing,” Anakin shrugged as he finished getting ready in the mirror.

“Seems about right.”

“Daaaaaaaaaaaaaddy!”

“One day, when I die, they won’t be able to scream like this, so might as well prepare them for that future,” he cringed.

“They’re ten, dear. Just be glad Luke and Leia are past this phase.”

“Do you think if we had a third pregnancy, twins would happen again? Or third time’s the charm and we get a single one?” He smirked before finished his collar. “I’ll check on them.”

“Five is more than enough and if you bring it up again, I’m taking permanent measures to make sure I can never have another child,” Padmé warned. “The triplets nearly killed me, remember?”

“I’m joking, sweetheart,” he raised his hands in defense and leaned down to kiss her. “You look perfect, love.”

“Daddy!” A sharp shout made him wince.

“I think I should go before they murder each other,” he mumbled giving her a quick peck on the cheek and hurrying down the hall to the playroom. “Alright, little shaaks, what’s happening?”

“Nothing!” Jinn yelled as his sisters tugged at his arms.

“Liar!” His sisters shouted together making Anakin cringe at the sound.

“You two little menaces are going to release your brother, now,” he said sternly. The triplets were so much more unruly than the twins. Speaking about the twins... “Shouldn’t Luke and Leia be watching over you three?”

“Leia’s making kissy faces in the mirror,” Cordé said.

Ugh, of course, Anakin rolled his eyes thinking about how his eldest daughter was hyper about a certain boy — a man, really, the age gap was huge — who was going to be present at the party. “And Luke?”

“Who knows? Racing with Ezra and Sabine?” Elysa suggested. “They’re boring. Why do we have to go to this stupid party anyway?”

“Because it’s your siblings’ birthday party and it would make me and Mom really happy to have you there and well behaved,” Anakin sighed and sat down on the couch. “Why were you three fighting and yelling for us? Hm?” He asked gently, tucking a blonde stray hair behind Cordé’s ear.

“Jinn smashed my paint jars,” Cordé said. “And Elysa’s music box.”

“I did not!”

“Yes, you did!”

“Jinn, come here,” Anakin tugged his youngest son closer until he could wrap one arm around him. “What happened?” He asked calmly.

“I was just practicing for Master Obi-Wan!” Jinn said tearfully. “I didn’t mean to break anything!”

“It’s okay,” he promised gently, cleaning the boy’s tears away. “I know Obi-Wan will understand and I can help you practice tomorrow morning, alright?”

“If he gets to practice, I want to practice too,” Cordé blurted out.

“Yeah, Daddy, it’s no fair! And I want a new music box,” Elysa pouted.

“It was a stupid music box,” Cordé said snidely, and Elysa responded by pushing her. “Hey!”

“Your paints are stupid!”

“Girls,” Anakin said, his voice carrying a warning tone as he separated them both with the Force and made them float a few feet above the ground. Jinn snickered at his sisters. “What have I told you about being good to each other?”

“Sorry, Daddy,” they chorused.

“Oh, I so don’t miss when Luke and I were your age,” Leia laughed, sweeping past them in a sparkling white gown with no sleeves and a plunging neckline. “Dad, have you seen Grandma? I wanted to ask about borrowing some of her jewelry.”

“You should also ask to borrow some fabric,” Anakin frowned as he slowly lowered the two young girls. “Where’s the rest of the neckline, Leia? What exactly are you trying to flaunt?”

“Dad, I’m nineteen, I can dress how I want,” his eldest daughter huffed, crossing her arms.

“How you want?” Anakin repeated. ‘Leia, I know your age. Trust me, I am *well aware* of how old you are. This is a matter of respect for your parents, who are throwing you a birthday party. Not to mention your *guests*. Everyone knows you are nineteen, you don’t have to give the HoloNet, and the entire Galaxy, a visual of how *nineteen* you look!’ Then he paused, as another thought, much less pleasant, crossed his mind. “You don’t have to give your *boyfriend* a view,” he muttered darkly.

“Ooooh,” the girls giggled.

“Gross,” Jinn muttered, running off with a scoff. Leia folded her arms and raised her chin defiantly as she looked up at her father.

“Han’s a good man, and you need to get over this stupid idea you have in your head that I’m still five years old!” she complained. “Ugh, I should’ve listened when he suggested we elope...”

“Han did what?” Padmé asked sharply as she emerged from the bedroom. “Leia, *no*.”

“Are you going to lecture me on the dangers of elopement, Mother? Really?” Leia scoffed. “I told him no, that wasn’t necessary, you’d be okay with us taking the next step in our relationship, but apparently, Dad is still acting like a child.”

Anakin was still clinging to the *elopement* idea so fully, to be able to answer her. It was like karma and his mother would have him know that. “Of course he’s a good man, that’s why he asked you to run away with him and *elope*. I am not acting like a child, young lady, I am your father and instead of parading around with half of your body naked, you should act a little bit more like the Princess of this Empire and demand some respect,” he scowled. *She’s so much like you, honey*, his mother often teased. ‘Cordé, Elysa, come on, you need to get ready,’ he nudged his youngest daughters on the shoulders. “You deal with that,” he grumbled to Padmé, glancing at Leia before taking the girls’ hands and walking down the hall towards the nursery.

“He *does* remember when you two met, right?” Leia asked sulkily. “It’s not fair.”

“Leia, if you want to be engaged to Han, you have my support, but there’s no need to rush things. It’s because of how your dad and I almost eloped that we know nineteen is too young for marriage.” Padmé guided her eldest daughter into the bedroom. “Now come on, let’s get you a shawl at least. Just so your father doesn’t have a heart attack.”

Leia snorted. “If Luke went without a shirt to the party, Dad wouldn’t make him wear a *shawl*,” she grumbled.

“No, but I’d make him put on a shirt because it’s unseemly to go around without one at a formal event,” Padmé corrected.

“I hope he finally has the guts to introduce you to Mara Jade,” Leia quipped.

“Who?”

Leia smirked. “I guess you’ll meet her at the party.”

“I heard you and Leia had quite the showdown today,” Shmi snickered as she approached her son, twirling a flute of champagne in her hand. Obviously, the triplets had ranted the earliest events to their Grandmother and Shmi could not stop herself from teasing her oldest son. “That Skywalker temper...” she tutted, shaking her head.

Anakin rolled his eyes and grabbed another flute. He had been speaking with the Organas before his Mother’s approach and they couldn’t stop speaking about how Winter was so given

to the rules and such a well behaved Princess. All Anakin could think was that plunging neckline and that dreadful elopement idea. “I wasn’t *that* problematic,” he sulked.

“Leia is not problematic. She’s stubborn *and* headstrong. You *were* the same. Thankfully, Rhia is an angel,” Shmi chuckled. Anakin didn’t have the heart to tell his Mother that his sister was actually a little demon with an angel’s face.

“Do you know that that boyfriend of hers wanted to *elope*?” Anakin said scandalized. “I would have *never* forgiven them, Mom. *Never*.”

Shmi burst out laughing. “Oh, sweetheart, what goes around, comes around,” she leaned into his shoulder, still laughing as Anakin looked at her bewildered. “I bet your reaction was priceless. I take it our Princess said no? Otherwise, you would have launched a manhunt already,” his mother teased.

Her son made a face. “I hate you,” he mumbled, petulant as a child, and took off looking for his wife, in search of some comfort.

“Aw, and what’s upsetting his Imperial Grumpiness now?” Rhia’s lilting voice came playfully from a few paces behind him. “It’s a party, big brother, you’re supposed to be having fun.”

“If it isn’t Mom’s little angel,” Anakin teased ruefully. “Did you know about Han Solo’s ideas of eloping with your niece?”

“I suggested it,” Rhia said with a smirk, draping an arm over an emerald-skinned Twi’lek girl. Anakin’s face fell. “Oola thought it was funny, right, gorgeous?” The girl nodded and giggled, kissing Rhia’s cheek.

“You’re unbelievable,” Anakin scoffed angrily. “And Mom says *I’m* the problematic child,” he rolled his eyes and stalked off.

“Daddy!” Elysa and Cordé charged towards him... dragging Han Solo along by both hands. “Look who we found for you!”

A slow grin appeared on the Emperor’s face. “I guess someone is getting dessert before dinner every night this week,” he winked at the girls. “Run along, little angels, Daddy has to speak with Captain Solo.”

The girls squealed with delight and scrambled off, hand in hand, leaving Han to smooth down his uniform jacket awkwardly. “Your Majesty,” he mumbled.

“Captain Solo,” Anakin greeted icily. “I see you could make it, after all,” he drawled out.

“I wasn’t gonna miss Luke and Leia’s birthday, sir,” Han pointed out. “Missions or no.”

“Obviously not,” the Emperor says with a raised eyebrow. “But I hope I don’t find you and Leia running away to *elope* tonight,” he said with a scowl. “You can imagine my discontent at this discovery.”

“Look, it was a heat of the moment thing,” Han protested stubbornly, but Anakin’s icy expression did not change. “But the feelings behind it were— *are* real. I’m crazy about her. Last I checked, that’s not a crime.”

“You are older than her, *much* older,” sure, Padmé was five years older than him but that was barely noticeable. Han was *ten* years older than Leia. While his daughter was entering her twenties, her so called boyfriend, was in his thirties. “You should have acted a bit more mature and maybe think twice about your actions, instead of suggesting such actions as a ‘heat of the moment thing’. Fortunately for all of us, especially you, my daughter was reasonable and said no. But tell me, Captain, what if she had said yes?” The thought of not walking his daughter down the aisle was painful. Of not doing... everything. The speech, the father-daughter dance, it was something he would have never be able to recover with Leia.

“When I suggested it, she was ranting about Prince Isolder,” the captain explained slowly. “I said it half to snap her out of it. I knew she wasn’t actually going to want that. I know her better than that.”

“Captain, if she had said yes, you would have lost all of my respect and all chances of ever having my blessing. Not that either of you care about it, but I still believe in tradition. I don’t care about who she was ranting about. Next time, try rationalizing your arguments and dumbfounded ideas,” Anakin scowled.

“All due respect, your majesty, it’s kind of hypocritical for you to be telling me all this.”

“Hypocrite or not, I am still your superior. Your Emperor and General. Learn from my past mistakes, Captain, otherwise, I might just forget my daughter cares for you and take actions by my own hands,” Anakin patted his shoulder with a warning expression, before leaving him standing in the middle of the ballroom.

“Dad!” As he turned around, he spotted Luke, who was his carbon copy with the same blonde hair and blue eyes, the mischievous expression masked with innocence. He looked troubled and Anakin did not have trouble guessing the reason of his eldest son’s worried expression.

“You’ve been awfully absent, son,” Anakin chuckled. “Have you finally brought the fiery redhead to introduce to your mother?” He teased.

“Mara wouldn’t say for sure whether she was coming,” Luke explained, running a hand through his hair nervously. “What if she decides not to show up, Dad? Leia’s never going to let me live it down!”

“I think she might surprise you. Were you with her today?” Anakin put one hand on his shoulder and guided him to a table full of his and Leia’s favorite foods. “I think she has some strong feelings for you and that she will take the next step. Meaning, she will come to this party and face your mother,” he smirked.

“I called her a few hours ago, but nothing since!” Luke looked absolutely miserable. “And I told her that there was going to be countless princesses waiting to pounce on me!”

“Playing the jealousy card?” Anakin chuckled. ‘Luke, I’m serious, she will come through for you,’ he squeezed his son’s shoulder. “She might not believe that you will look at other women, you are completely devoted to her, but she will come to mark her territory. Women don’t usually like to share.”

“I can tell.” Tilting his head, Luke indicated his twin, who had found the time to ‘lose’ her shawl and stick herself to the side of her boyfriend. “Guess she heard some old flames of

Han's might be here tonight."

Anakin looked over his shoulder and sighed, his gaze returning to his son. "That's a disaster waiting to happen," he mumbled as he grabbed a full glass from a passing serving droid and abandoning his empty one. 'Your sister will only realize I'm right when she has her heart broken,' he shrugged then something caught his attention behind Luke's back. "But you..." he turned Luke around, "...have someone to welcome to the party."

"Dad—" Whatever Luke had been about to say died as he saw Mara Jade. His cheeks became nearly as red as his girlfriend's hair. "Um."

"Go!" Anakin laughed pushing him forward. 'Greet her like a proper boyfriend would and come and officially introduce her as your girlfriend,' Mara's green eyes locked with Luke's and she beamed at him, smoothing down the fabric of her dress. "She even wore a dress for you," his father snickered.

"Shut up," Luke mumbled. But he started shuffling towards Mara, who, seeming far more impatient, cut through the crowd to get to him first and kissed him quite enthusiastically. Several of the guests gasped at the sight.

"Mara Jade, I presume?" Padmé asked, coming to stand by Anakin's side. "She's certainly very... forward."

Anakin chuckled and wrapped one arm around Padmé's waist. "He played the jealousy card. Mara is just staking her claim over the countless of princesses wishing to sink their claws into our son. I believe he just broke Princess Winter's heart," he said as he watched Luke beam at her and place a red curl behind his girlfriend's ear. "I think they look cute and Mara is a good girl, talented too. Not to mention she challenges Luke in a positive way."

"Winter Organa is *not* that interested in Luke. If you paid attention when Breha and I talked, you'd know she was seeing Tycho Celchu," Padmé scolded, still watching their son. "Really, though, it's so flagrant and improper..."

"It's real," he squeezed her waist. "There are no pretenses there. No holding back. It's pure love and if everyone knows it, good. You should be happy Luke has found someone like Mara."

"Funny, I think you would have a very different reaction if it were Leia and Captain Solo putting on such a display," Padmé said scathingly and Anakin's expression darkened. "He might be a little scruffy around the edges, but he understands how to behave when necessary."

"Mara is the same age as Luke and a talented Force user. Their personalities are aligned and well balanced. Our daughter and Solo? That's a ticking time bomb that is not going to last for a very long time. They are either kissing or screaming at each other. Do you think I like my *nineteen*-year-old daughter to date a man who's about to turn thirty?" Anakin scowled. "I don't. She has a lot more to do and see with her life. Shackling herself to the Captain is a mistake."

"Ani, telling her no is only going to make her double down on him. But I think they're more compatible than you give them credit for. You're just falling into the same habits your mother had." Padmé huffed and Anakin rolled his eyes for the umpteenth time that night.

“They have more than demonstrated their point, does she *have* to keep kissing Luke like that?”

Anakin shook his head, choosing to ignore her jab about his Mom. “You’re acting like they are undressing each other when it’s just innocent kisses,” he said amused. Mara had her arms around Luke’s waist and was giving him soft kisses to his jawline, and Luke played with the ends of her curly hair while whispering something in her ear. He said something that Mara was not expecting because she pulled back with a worried expression and Luke chuckled. “You need to be nice now, Padmé,” the Emperor said as he guessed what Luke was telling his girlfriend.

Mara seemed to grow nervous as she stepped back and Luke took her hand and glanced briefly at his parents. Mara nodded slowly, biting her lip and hand in hand, the couple walked towards his parents, Mara one step behind Luke.

“Mom, Dad, I want to introduce you to someone *very* important to me,” Mara blushed as Luke tugged her forward. “This is my girlfriend, Mara Jade. Mara, you already know my Dad, and this is my Mom, Padmé,” he said beaming.

Mara curtsied. “Your Majesties. Thank you for receiving me.”

“Ah, it was about time Luke *officially* introduced you to us,” Anakin grinned and Mara gave him a grateful smile. “Obi-Wan and I had a bet going and everything!”

“Dad!” Luke narrowed his eyes and Mara chuckled but glanced at Padmé nervously.

“Miss Jade,” Padmé said rather stiffly. “Welcome.”

“Thank you,” Mara replied softly, as she looked at Luke with a hint of panic. ‘Can I say, your majesty, I really look up to you?’ She added. “If it wasn’t for Amidala’s Crusade, my parents and I... We wouldn’t be alive today. It’s really an honor to meet you!”

Padmé coughed, turning it into a smile. “That’s very sweet of you to say, Miss Jade.”

“No, it’s the truth and your son just keeps speaking about his wonderful mother and it’s kind of intimidating,” Mara chuckled.

“Mara!” Leia’s sing-song voice called as she came up to the redhead and enveloped her in a tight hug. ‘Finally, my brother got the courage to bring you here, oh, I’m so happy to see you,’ Luke rolled his eyes and nodded at Han who approached them more warily. “Isn’t she great, Mom?” Leia questioned, stealing Luke’s thoughts and giving him a wink.

“Charming.”

“There you are, Mother wanted to see you!” Rhia chirped, grabbing her niece and nephew by the arms. “Go on, I’ll keep Han and Mara entertained while you’re busy.”

“Hey, Rhia.” Han smiled. “Did I see you with a new girlfriend?”

“One of them. I’ll tell you all about it over a drink, come on.” Before Anakin could object, his sister pulled away the twins’ suitors, leaving him alone with Padmé, who tightened her grip on his arm.

“I don’t like her,” she muttered.

"My arm could tell," Anakin drawled. "You don't like that Luke is growing up and finding himself a woman that takes care of him. Now *who* is being like my mother?" He snickered. "We have to finally admit to ourselves... they are growing up and making their own choices. I don't like Leia's choice, but short of killing Captain Solo, I can't really do anything about it. You're the same with Mara. Even if I do like Mara, very much," Anakin shrugged. "Unless you want to take a page from my dear mom's book and threaten them until they flee, our hands are tied. But really, if I'm being honest, I don't think that would work with either of them."

"I think you just like her because you're trying to get back at me for liking Solo," Padmé grumbled. "Maybe I'll sleep in a guest room tonight."

Anakin caressed her waist and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "We both know you won't," he kissed her beneath her earlobe.

"Don't push me, Skywalker."

He just nuzzled her cheek and brought his lips down to hers.

"Grandma, what is it?" Leia asked "Rhia said you wanted to see us. Is there another present we missed this morning?"

"Sort of," Shmi said, pulling her two eldest grandchildren to her side. "It's a bit of advice. You two are about to be in over your heads more than you know."

Luke and Leia shared a glance. "What do you mean?" They asked in perfect symphony.

"My darlings," Shmi kissed both of them on each cheek, "your parents are going to be just as bad as I was. Maybe even worse."

They knew the story, obviously. It was probably everyone's favorite. "Dad likes Mara, and Mom just met her," Luke pointed out.

"Yes, but you can already tell from Mom's posture she's not very happy with your choice," Leia snorted.

"Oh, yeah? You're lucky Dad hasn't force choked your boyfriend yet. If anyone has any reason to worry, is you. I'm pretty sure Dad would rather burn in Mustafar's lava then walk you down the aisle to Han."

"And Mom would rather give birth to quadruplets than let *you* marry Mara."

"Yes, it's really not going to be easy," Shmi chuckled. "But, just like I did, they will learn that you both make your own choices and they will leave you and your sweethearts be."

"Or we could do a double elopement," Leia mumbled. "No waiting involve there."

"Only if we want to be disowned. They would *never* forgive us."

"Jinn would be a better Emperor than you anyway," Leia teased.

Luke made a face. "Shut up. Who says I wanted to be Emperor? But that's not the point. I want to have a good, decent wedding. Not some rush up thing because I want to rebel. And I

actually want Mom and Dad to be part of my life, thank you very much. Why don't you elope with Han? See how that works out for you."

"Age before beauty, dearest brother."

"I don't know what you mean by that. But do it. Do it. I always wanted to be their favorite and only oldest child," he smirked.

"Coward."

"Han has already proposed. You said no. Who's the coward here?"

"Alright, alright, no one is eloping. Eloping is a bad idea. If your father had gone through with that idea, I don't think I could have forgiven him or your mother. More your mother," Shmi interrupted their bickering. "We're a family and family sticks together and plans weddings together. Deal?"

"Deal. And for the record, Luke," Leia reached into one of the hidden pockets of her dress and produced a gold ring with two blue stones. "I didn't completely say no."

"Dad is going to kill him," Luke snorted.

"Then I'll kill Dad. He doesn't own me."

"He's still our Dad, Leia..."

"And Han is the love of my life!"

"Oh dear, it's starting..." Shmi sighed and sipped on her drink.

"He didn't even get Dad's permission!"

"Again, Luke, Dad doesn't own me!"

"Then elope," her brother taunted.

"Maybe I will!"

"Sweetheart, please lower your voice," Han interrupted, moving in with a drink of toniray for her. "We could nearly hear you from the bar."

"Go over to my father right now and ask him for his blessing," Leia told him, accepting the drink. "While he's with Mother and she can make him say yes."

Luke just shook his head disapprovingly.

"He looked like he wanted to eat me alive back there," Han pointed out.

"Do it, or I'm giving the ring back," Leia warned.

"Dear, don't be hasty," Shmi warned. "The last thing we want is for your father to have a meltdown in the middle of the party."

"Why do you have to challenge him?" Luke asked.

"Same reason you'd defy Mom if she said you couldn't marry Mara."

"You think we're so alike..." Luke drawled out and stood up. "Do whatever you want. I'm going to stay clear from the blast," and he walked away.

"Leia, seriously, I'll do it any other time but not tonight," Han insisted, hugging her tightly. "I'm not going to ruin your birthday."

"I can't believe you don't have the courage to ask my father's permission," Leia rolled her eyes. "My Mom is right by his side, she won't let anything happen to you."

"Maybe it's just that I'm not a fan of this turning into something that gets plastered all over the Holonet," Han countered. "Sometimes it's better to be smart than brave, Princess. Brave idiots get killed."

"You just don't want to face him," Leia sighed and put the ring away. "Guess I'll keep this saved then."

"Hey, don't pout like that," Han rubbed her shoulders. "I'm gonna make it up to you. Promise."

"Promises, promises," she sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Have I ever broken one I made to you?"

"You haven't asked my father's permission to marry me. Not that is *necessary*. Is more telling him than asking, really, so I don't know what the problem is."

"He's already mad at me for the elopement suggestion!"

"Now you're going to show him that you have the correct attitude," Leia said, smoothing his hair.

"He'll strip me of my rank and kick me out of the Army," Han muttered. "If he doesn't kill me."

"He will do that now or if you ask him later, it doesn't matter the time of the day, dear," Shmi, who was still observing, amused.

"Ma'am, I'm half-convinced my whole family wants me dead," Han said. "And I don't know what I did, aside from having a mind of my own."

"We are going to be your new family and you can forget about them," Leia replied and squeezed his hand. "No one here wants you dead."

"Except Anakin, but at least you know why," Shmi interjected.

"Grandma!" Leia scolded.

"I'm gonna go get another drink, I'm too sober for this."

"Getting drunk is not going to help your case," Shmi quipped.

"It's drinking, not shooting someone," Han said defensively. Shmi shrugged and leaned back sipping the rest of her drink. "Are you going to pick on Mara at any point?"

"Given that she has Padmé to handle it, I'll stand back. It's going to be a tough ride already for the girl."

"You were the one who fell in love with me, you have no one but yourself to blame," Leia teased.

"You were the one who hung around me ever since your dad promoted me," Han countered easily.

"Which I'm sure he regrets now," Shmi muttered to herself.

"Okay, I'm getting bored, so if you're not going to ask my father for his blessing, then you have to ask me to dance," Leia announced.

"You're in that much rush to marry me, Princess?" Han teased as he offered her a hand.

"I'm in a rush to make sure no one else thinks they can steal you from me."

"I'm flattered, but you are stuck with me, your highness," he chuckled pulling her up. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Prove it, then."

Han sighed, impatiently, and looked behind him to the Emperor and Empress, quietly chatting by the doors of the balcony. "Fine. But if I die, I want you to know that I love you and I went thinking of you and how you *were* the death of me."

Leia smiled smugly. "I know."

Shmi burst out laughing as Han walked away and towards her son. "What do you think it's going to happen?"

"Daddy will cave. I'm his princess," Leia said proudly.

"He has two others now, you're not the only one," Shmi teased. "Let's hope he doesn't throw Han from the balcony or expel him from the Army."

Han swallowed nervously. "You are so lucky I'm a nice man, princess," he muttered under his breath before straightening his jacket one last time. "Your Majesties?"

Anakin turned to him slowly. "What is it, Captain?" He asked tiredly.

"I don't want to elope with Leia," he started. "But I do want to marry her, and I'm not asking for your permission because she's not your property — not that she's going to be mine... look, the point is, I love her, I want to marry her, she wants the same thing, and I hope that even if you never like me, you can put up with me because of those first three things and because you're her family and I don't want her to choose between me and all of you. So... could I please have your blessing?"

The Emperor was caught by surprise and he blinked several time to make sure he wasn't dreaming it. He looked from Han to Padmé and then glanced to the other end of the ballroom, where his eldest daughter sat, beaming. *It's better than eloping*, his traitorous mind reasoned, but still, he stood quietly.

"I can wait for an answer," Han said. "I said what I needed to. I'll leave—"

"I don't have a choice and I just *know* you already proposed," Anakin said stiffly.

"Do you want me to apologize and ask for the ring back?"

"What will it change?" He crossed his arms and shrugged. "I doubt she would give it back. What's done is done and you were going to do it with or without my blessing."

"It's not like we set a date!"

"Anakin," Padmé interjected. "Please. This was going to happen at some point. Be for Leia what your mother wasn't for us that first time."

"What? I didn't say no, what else do you want?" Anakin asked.

"To say yes," she replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "That's different."

"Fine. Yes . Whatever. Is everyone happy now?"

"Very." Padmé took his hands as Han hurried off. "I'm proud of you. And think of it this way. Now we can get involved in the planning. It could take *ages*. Years, even."

"It's like you don't know your daughter, she'll marry within the month just to prove to me she can," Anakin huffed. "I don't care anyway, they'll do whatever they want. I'm going to search for the triplets," he scowled and left.

"Ani." Padmé hurried after him catching his hand. "I do know our daughter. And she's always going to need us."

"I told him yes because I had no other choice. But now, you are not going to put Mara through anything. If I have to accept *him* , you accept her," Anakin stated. "No excuses, Padmé!" He spotted the triplets around the candy table and pulled away from Padmé, towards the triplets who were busy stuffing their pockets with all sorts of candy.

"That's too much!"

"No, it isn't!"

"What do *you* know, Cordé?"

"More than you!"

"Shh! Daddy's coming!" Elysa warned.

"You don't have to steal it, the food is ours, you know that, right?" Anakin laughed as he kissed the top of Cordé's head and adjusted Jinn's hair with his hand.

"We just don't want anyone else to have it," Jinn explained, popping one of the sweets in his mouth. "Are you gonna put Han in the dungeon?"

Anakin sighed. "No, or your older sister will throw a fit," he said grabbing a handful of small candy and popping it in his mouth,

"Awwwww, Leia doesn't have to know," Jinn complained. "I'll help!"

"You're so weird," Elysa said, shaking her head. "C'mon, Cordé."

“Trust me, your sister would know,” Anakin sighed. “What are you girls going to do?”

“See who else Rhia’s dating.”

He rolled his eyes as they ran off. “Women, Jinn, you will never understand them, trust me.”

“I don’t want to understand women, I want to be a Jedi. Like Uncle Obi-Wan was before he married Aunt Satine.”

“It’s a good goal, son,” he smiled. “Now let’s find your Uncle Obi-Wan and talk about you becoming a Jedi, hm?”

“Dad?” Jinn wrapped his hand around Anakin’s fingers.

“Yes?” Anakin smiled down at him and squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“I’m not ever gonna have to be Emperor, am I? I think I’d suck at it.”

Anakin crouched down to his height. “The only one who will become Emperor or Empress is the one that wants it. It doesn’t have to be Luke, it doesn’t have to be you. The person that takes over needs to want to be in this position,” he explained. “But it’s not something that you’re going to have to worry about for a long time. I’m not going anywhere, anytime soon,” he smiled and kissed his forehead.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“I love you, Dad. And I’m your favorite, right?”

“I love you too, Jinn and I don’t have favorites,” Anakin chuckled and messed up his hair, standing up.

“That means yes.”

His father just laughed and took his hand, heading in Obi-Wan’s direction.

“You never told me you were a mama’s boy,” Mara teased, ruffling Luke’s hair. “It’s so cute.”

Luke laughed, blushing. “It’s true I’m close to my mother, yes. She’s an amazing woman and she has taught me a lot. Look, I know she seemed stiff and cold, but once you get to know her, I know you will get along.”

“Aw, Luke, you think I don’t know what’s happening? She feels threatened because I’m stealing her baby boy. And it’s fine,” his girlfriend laughed. “I’m a tough girl. I can still admire your mother and be grateful for everything she’s done that ended up helping my family without caring whether or not she approves of me dating you.”

“She will approve of you, I know it,” he leaned down to kiss her. “I’m happy you’re here today, Mara, I was really worried you wouldn’t come.”

"I thought about it. But then I figured I could use this as leverage for you to take me to Canto Bight," she teased. "There's a gorgeous hotel there that I've always wanted to see the inside of."

"Everything you want. Take a week, or two perhaps, and just be by ourselves. It's a great idea," Luke mumbled, kissing her cheek.

"Damn right it is," Mara giggled. "That's why you have me."

"Hold up, I have some pretty great ideas as well. Remember our first date? It was pretty amazing if I do say so myself," Luke said cockily.

"Yeah, especially the part where you fell in the fountain," she snorted. "Your mom's coming."

Luke turned around and smiled warmly at his mother. "So, has Dad murdered Han already?" He quipped and Mara swatted him on the shoulder.

"No, but I think he's probably not going to be very affectionate with me these next few days," Padmé said. "Miss Jade, may I borrow my son for a moment?"

"Of course." Mara stepped aside with a smile. "I'll find you later, handsome."

He winked at her watching her go, before turning to his Mom. "Was Dad really that angry?" Luke cringed. "I knew he was always on the defense with Han, but hey, at least she didn't elope. *Then* it would be chaos. I don't see Dad forgiving her for that."

"He doesn't appreciate being backed into a corner the way Han did," Padme explained. "It's part of the territory that comes with being Emperor. I thought you would have learned that by now."

"No one likes to be backed into a corner, but in Han's defense, Leia bullied him to do it," Luke pointed out and then sighed. 'I know, I know, But... can we not speak about my *future*, please?' He made a face. "We have time and Dad is not going anywhere, so all this preparation is ahead of time," he dismissed it. "So... Mara. What did you think of her?"

Padmé pursed her lips. "I think you care for her a lot. And that she's more than a little rough around the edges, and I'm concerned for what that might mean in the long run."

"Mara is raw and original and that is what I love about her. She is not a polished Princess whose feelings I can't trust. I see all these women here," he waved to the ballroom, 'and I can only trust a handful of them and that's because they're family. Everyone else is wearing a mask. It's fake. Their feelings are not real. Mara is the opposite and I love her for being so genuine and for loving me for who I am and not for who my parents are. She's not afraid to tell me off.' Luke realized he was ranting and smiled timidly. "I love her, Mom and she needs a chance. Please give it to her and *do not* take a page from Grandmother's book!" He warned.

The Empress' face fell. "That was over the line, Luke."

"I'm sorry, Mom," he rushed forward, wrapping his mother into a hug. He was already taller than her. "I just want you to understand that this is real, you know? And I would like you to give her a chance."

“As your mother, I’m happy for you, Luke, I really am. But as Empress, I’m worried you don’t understand what you’re getting into. Both of you are going to be scrutinized and antagonized for this, and it will only get worse if you keep following this path. I’m concerned about the instability that threatens. You know being the Imperial Heir means your choices aren’t entirely your own.”

“What if I don’t want to be Emperor?” Luke said, pulling away in frustration. “Even if I wanted that, why couldn’t Mara be at my side, just like you are at Dad’s?”

“There is no need to make a scene,” Padmé scolded quietly. “And Mara does not have the political experience that I did at your age. Your father and I worked in part because of that. Do you know this is something she can handle? That she wants?”

“Alright, Mom, you don’t approve of her. You can join Dad and you can both stew on your disapproval together.” Luke sighed, “But I am not going to argue about this at my birthday party,” he turned on his heel and returned to the party.

Padmé sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat as she snagged another drink off a passing serving droid. She downed the contents in one swallow.

“You look as happy as I did when I gave my permission to Solo,” Anakin quipped, joining his wife. “By the way, the triplets might be on a sugar rush by the end of the night. I say let Leia and Han handle them and see if they enjoy parenting.” He made a face.

“Don’t start, Ani. My concerns about Mara Jade are on a much larger scale than your insecurities about Han Solo,” Padmé scolded.

“Really?” Anakin drawled out. “How so? How are your concerns much bigger than mine?”

“Because we’re not just talking about a partner for our child, we’re talking about a future Empress,” she argued. “Unless Luke does something truly reckless, like abdicating in favor of Jinn. Or Leia.”

Anakin gave a humorless laugh. “It’s like you don’t see it at all.”

“See what?!”

“Luke doesn’t want to be Emperor. He hasn’t said it, but it’s clear that it will not make him happy and I am not going to force him into being Emperor because he had the bad luck of being the first to be born. Jinn just made me promise he wouldn’t have to be Emperor. With my luck, Leia will want to be Empress and we’re stuck with that moron as an Emperor.”

“Are you sure you’re not just jealous because he might be a better pilot than you?” Padmé asked, trying to lighten the mood. Anakin just gave her a sour look.

“But that’s four years!” Leia’s shriek was heard from across the room.

“It’s my last tour, Princess, stop being so melodramatic!” Han’s reply was almost as loud. “I thought you’d appreciate me not going off and getting killed!”

“Look, I gave them my permission and they’re ripping each other apart. Again,” Anakin muttered, rolling his eyes. “You see, that was too quick. That is my concern. They never see eye to eye.”

“Better they get it out of the way now than after something more extreme,” Padmé reminded him.

“Just resign!”

“I’m not going to abandon my squad! What kind of captain would that make me?”

“One who has a fiancée to think of!”

“Sith kriffing hell, Leia, it’s not like I’m running off to be on a pleasure cruise!”

Anakin sighed and turned his back on the fight, preferring to stare at the traffic lights of Imperial City. “Just warn me when they murder each other or break up.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” Anakin just shrugged. “Ani, do we really have any place to judge?”

“I’m not judging. I don’t like him. I gave them my permission, didn’t I? I did not strip him from his rank or send him on a suicide mission to get him out of the way.”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“I wouldn’t have done it. Nor will I. I am in my right to dislike him, though.”

“Did you even realize what they were talking about? He’s clearly talking about delaying the wedding until after he’s done with his commitment to the army. *Four years*.”

“I never said he was not a good soldier or a trustworthy one,” Anakin sighed. “I’ll feel the same about this wedding in four years as I feel right now.”

“Anakin.” Now it was Shmi cutting in.

“I don’t need another person telling me I’m wrong,” he grumbled.

“No, no, I just wanted to remind both of you that you’re overstepping,” his mother laughed, pulling them both into a hug. “You need to stay out of your children’s lives. Trust me, I know. You know I know. And darlings, mother always knows best.”

Padmé exchanged a glance with Anakin and sighed. For once, Shmi was completely, without any exception, right.